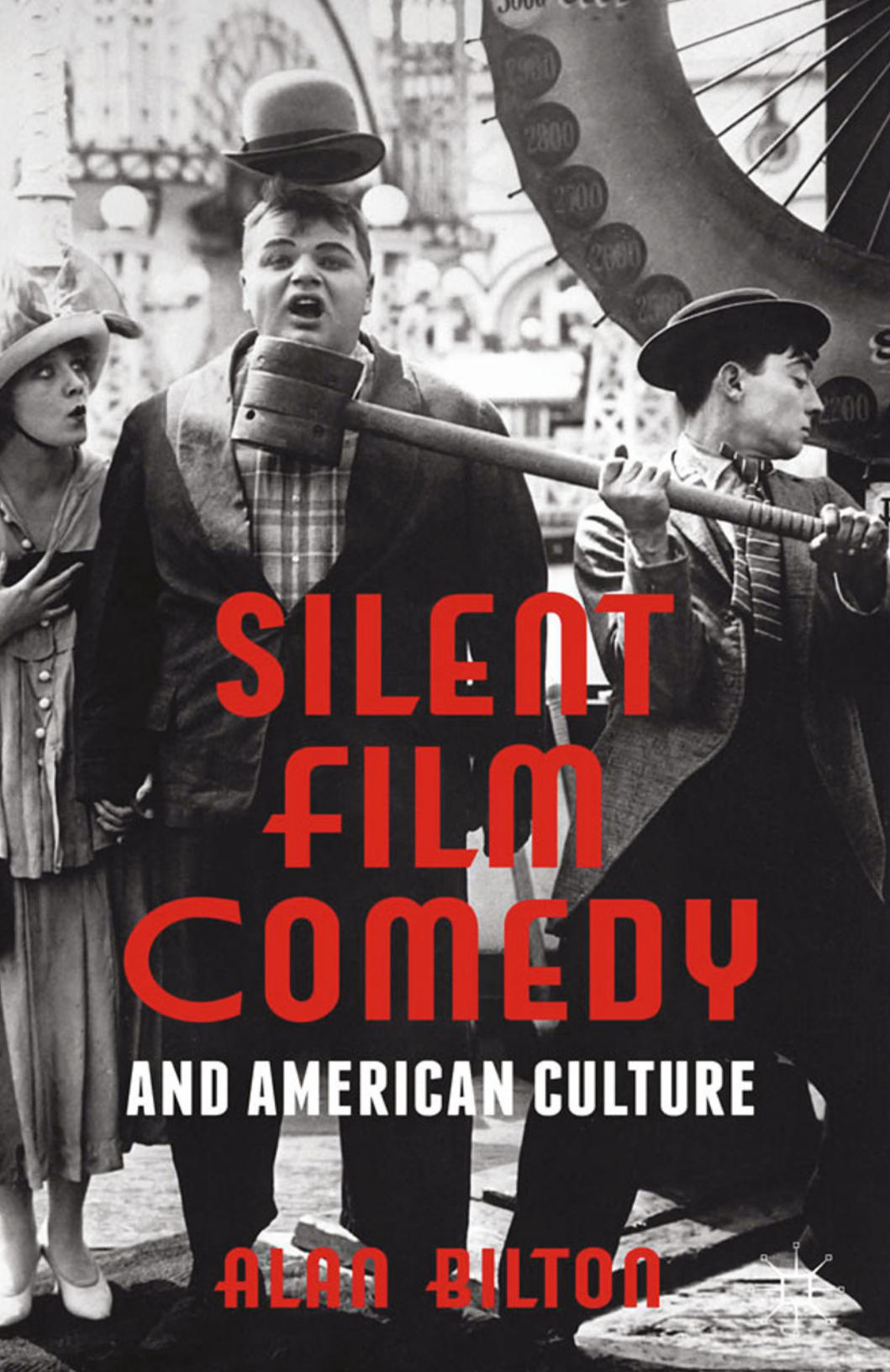

SILENT FILM COMEDY

AND AMERICAN CULTURE

ALAN BILTON

Silent Film Comedy and American Culture

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Silent Film Comedy and American Culture

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2013 978-1-137-02024-6

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First published 2013 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978-1-349-43747-4 ISBN 978-1-137-02025-3 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9781137020253

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13

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Acknowledgements

Special thanks for their encouragement and support during the writing of this book to Hilaria Loyo and Ian Scott. Thanks for their assistance, inspiration and friendship to Stefanie Albers, David Anderson, Dave Bewley-Taylor, Bill Blazek, Celestino Deleyto, Wendy Everett, Rachel Farebrother, Pierre Floquet, John Horne, Steve McVeigh, Giles Ménégaldo, Joy Porter, Neil Reeve, David Roche, Jon Roper, Dominique Sipiere, Melvyn Stokes, Juan Antonio Suàrez, Rob Stone, Bryn Willcock.

This book is dedicated with all my love to Pamela and Laurie.

Edited versions of the following chapters appeared in the following journals and are included here with the kind permission of the publishers.

'Nobody Loves a Fat Man: Conspicuous Consumption and the Case of Fatty Arbuckle in 1920's America', *Amerikastudien*, 2012, 57 (1), 51–66.

'Consumerism and Its Discontents: Harold Lloyd, Edward Bernays, and the Anxieties of Capitalism', *Archivos*, 2006, 53, 150–175.

'Buster Keaton and the South: The First Things and the Last', *Journal of American Studies*, 2006, 40, 487–502, Cambridge University Press.

'The Shell-Shocked Silents: Trauma, Aphasia and the Silent War Film', *Le cinema en toutes lettres,* Michel Houdiard, 2007, 27–41.

A Brief Chronology of Silent Film Comedy

1889 Birth of Charles Spencer Chaplin in South London – whether into genteel poverty or grinding poverty remains a matter of some controversy. The lack of a verifiable birth certificate has also exercised many historians, as well as the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

1895 Release of the Lumière brothers' *Le Jardinier/The Gardener* (Auguste and Louis Lumière, 1895), generally considered to be both the first film comedy and, indeed, the first narrative film in all of cinema (although *Sortie d'usine/Leaving the Factory* (Auguste and Louis Lumière, 1895) does have a loose narrative structure in that the gates of the factory open and the workers depart so that the process takes *exactly* the length of a reel of film; there's even a vaguely amusing bicycle incident). *Le Jardinier* features the classic combo of naughty boy/gardener/garden hose. The offending tyke is, of course, punished for his transgression at the end of the film.

Birth of Joseph Frank Keaton in Piqua, Kansas, into a family of travelling vaudevillians. Ever the publicist, his father would later claim that the town was destroyed by a cyclone only days later.

1905 Film debut of French comedian Max Linder, dapper ladies' man and one of slapstick comedy's greatest proponents. His silk hat and cutaway coat turned up in a long run of *boulevardier* comedies before the First World War. These were generally inventive, playful farces, often seasoned with fantastical effects and tremendous physical comedy. Seriously injured as an ambulance driver while serving on the front, he suffered a nervous breakdown in 1916, but nevertheless emigrated to the US as Charlie Chaplin's replacement in 1917 (Chaplin referred to him as 'the Professor' and signed letters, 'his Disciple'). Linder subsequently

returned to France in 1922, telling reporters that he 'did not feel funny anymore', although two more films, one directed by Abel Gance, followed. He attempted suicide, alongside his wife, in Vienna in 1924, before finally succeeding in Paris the following year.

1908 Former boiler maker and failed opera singer Mack Sennett learns the ropes of film-making under D.W. Griffith at Biograph. He also turns up as the leading player in the early slapstick *The Curtain Pole,* drunkenly transporting the said pole through the streets of New York.

1909 Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle makes his first short films for Selig.

1910 Charles Chaplin visits the US with Fred Karno's Music Hall Company – Stan Laurel is also in the troupe.

Mack Sennett directs his first comedy shorts for Biograph.

Italian comedian Roméo Bosetti heads up the new Comica studio in Nice and becomes one of Europe's biggest stars, appearing (depending on the country of release) as Sablon, Babylas or Little Moritz.

1911 First film work of John Bunny, generally seen as the US's first true comedy star. His debut film, *Jack Fat and Jim Slim at Coney Island* (director unknown, 1910), is lost, but his surviving shorts are rather staid situational comedies, described as 'jovial dramas'. A striking anomaly is *The Subduing of Mrs Nag* (George D. Baker, 1911), a racy and sexually ambiguous comedy starring Mabel Normand, one of her few surviving early shorts.

1912 Formation of the Keystone Film Company after Sennett leaves Biograph. Alas, the story that colourful businessmen Adam Kessel and Charles O. Bauman funded it as a way of paying off a gambling debt has proved to be apocryphal. Mabel Normand, by now Sennett's lover, leaves Biograph to join him. The first Keystone double bill is made up of the ethically dubious *Cohen Collects a Debt* (Mack Sennett, 1912), starring Ford Sterling, and a Mable Normand 'diving' film, *The Water Nymph* (Mack Sennett, 1912).

Chaplin's second tour of the US, during which Mack Sennett signs him up for Keystone.

1913 Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle joins Keystone; his on-screen partnership with Mabel Normand produces some of his most endearing and

enduring work. By now Keystone is the industry leader in terms of screen comedy.

Chester Conklin's walrus moustache appears adorning the upper lip of one of the Keystone cops. He was later teamed with Mack Swain in the 'Ambrose and Walrus' films, and his hirsute brush is still in place for Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times* (Charles Chaplin, 1936).

First film work (for Biograph) of Max Davidson, Berlin-born Jewish comedian and one of silent comedy's most interesting also-rans. All too often given stereotypically offensive roles (his early persona was 'Izzy Hupp' the pawnbroker), Davidson persisted and appeared alongside Charley Chase and Laurel and Hardy before emerging as a leading man in his own right in the late 1920s – *Jewish Prudence* (1927), directed by Leo McCarey, is a rare surviving example.

1914 *Making a Living* is Charlie Chaplin's on-screen debut. A version of his Tramp persona appears in *Kid Auto Races at Venice,* released the same year.

Tillie's Punctured Romance (Mack Sennett, 1914) is the first feature-length slapstick comedy, with Marie Dressler, Mabel Normand and Charlie Chaplin, the latter as the villain of the piece.

Chaplin leaves Keystone for Essanay.

1915 Sennett joins D.W. Griffith and Thomas Ince to set up the prestigious Triangle Film Corporation, widely interpreted as an attempt to move his material upmarket.

W.C. Fields makes his film debut for Mutual; only one short, *Pool Sharks* (Edwin Middleton, 1915), survives. Except for a cameo or two, he isn't seen again on screen until D.W. Griffith's *Sally of the Sawdust* in 1925. Sound, and his alcoholic growl, will subsequently cement his persona.

Harold Lloyd appears as Willy Work in a number of shorts for Pathé, produced by Hal Roach. His subsequent character, 'Lonesome Luke', is, if anything, even more obviously plagiarized from Chaplin's Tramp, but for a time proves enormously popular.

English-born comedian Lupino Lane starts making film comedies in London, editing them at home until the nitrate stock makes his flat unliveable. He eventually leaves for the US in 1920, signing with Fox, and creating a foppish, aristocratic idiot character, half-way between Harry Langdon and Max Linder.

Often unflatteringly shot, and described by the *Motion Picture World* as 'having no fear of ugliness', Louise Fazenda makes her on-screen debut for Keystone. She would go on to work prolifically throughout the twenties, appearing opposite Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle, Charley Chase, Raymond Griffith, as well as a leading comedienne in her own right.

Edna Purviance becomes Chaplin's leading lady during his time at Essanay, remaining so until 1923 when Chaplin directs her in his only straight 'drama' *A Woman of Paris*. Despite a lack of on-screen roles after this, she remains on Chaplin's payroll until her death in 1958.

1916 *Fatty and Mabel Adrift* (Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle) is the funniest and most touching flowering of their on-screen partnership. In August, Arbuckle leaves Sennett to achieve complete artistic control over his work via the setting up of The Comique Film Corporation.

Mutual awards Charlie Chaplin his own studio.

Cartoonist Larry Semon begins to work in movies as a gag writer and comedian; by 1917 he is appearing in one-reelers as a leading clown. His comedies are characterized by absurdist 'impossible' gags and copious special effects, and for a time in the 1920s he is considered a serious rival to Chaplin and Lloyd. Alas, few complete films survive.

Bobby Vernon and Gloria Swanson make a series of light romantic comedies for Sennett, moving the studio away from purely slapstick work.

1917 Buster Keaton makes his on-screen debut in *The Butcher Boy* (Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle), attempting to purchase molasses from Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle.

The Triangle Film Corporation collapses and Sennett moves to Paramount, retaining his independence but losing all rights to the Keystone brand.

Eric Campbell, the much-loved heavy from Chaplin's films with Mutual, dies in a road accident.

Alice Howell, knockabout comedienne for Keystone, moves to Lehrman Knock Out (L-KO) to set up 'Howl' comedies. She can still be seen in slapstick comedies for Paramount in the 1920s, but eventually quits to become a straight actress, declaring such work 'unladylike'.

Billy West, probably the best-known Chaplin impersonator, starts making a series of blatant Chaplin copies for the Joy Film Company.

1918 *Mickey* (F. Richard Jones/James Young) is the only production of the Mabel Normand studios. Although the film was eventually a great success, it had to wait a year to be picked up for distribution, during which time Normand signed with Goldwyn.

Stan Laurel makes his on-screen debut in *Nuts in May* (Robin Williamson, 1918). Ironically, given his US tour with Chaplin in 1910, he was working as a Chaplin imitator on stage at the time.

Best known for his sound work with the Marx Brothers and W.C. Fields, Leo McCarey begins a long career in Hollywood, working in the silent era with Charley Chase, Mabel Normand, and Laurel and Hardy.

Chaplin marries the 17-year-old Mildred Harris in a hushed affair intended to allay any scandal. After her pregnancy proves to be a false alarm, they separate 18 months later.

1919 In *Bumping into Broadway* (Hal Roach), Harold Lloyd first assumes the role of his familiar 'glasses' character.

During the making of *Haunted Spooks* (1920), a prop bomb goes off in Harold Lloyd's hand, severely burning his face and removing the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. It takes him eight months to recover, after which he returns to the screen with the aid of a prosthetic glove.

Light comedy actress Colleen Moore's earliest surviving film, *The Busher* (Jerome Storm), with Charley Chase, is released.

With his career languishing after leaving Keystone, Mack Swain is 'rescued' by Chaplin and cast as the replacement heavy for Eric Campbell. He appears regularly in Chaplin's movies thereafter, with *The Gold Rush* (1926) being his finest hour.

1920 Keaton's first independent short *One Week* (Edward Cline/Buster Keaton) is released. He shoots *The High Sign* (1921) in 1920 but feels dissatisfied with it. Consequently, it is shelved until a production hiatus caused by Keaton's broken leg on *The Haunted House* (Edward Cline/Buster Keaton, 1921) necessitates its release.

Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid* is produced as 'A Picture with A Smile, and Perhaps a Tear', according to the title card.

The Simp (Charley Chase) is produced. It is a particularly non-politically correct title for one of the few surviving works of Lloyd Hamilton,

whose tubby, simple-minded everyman 'Ham' appears in films from 1913 to 1927.

1921 Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle charged with murder after the death of Virginia Rappé during a drunken party in San Francisco. It takes three court cases to clear his name, and in the process his career is ruined. In 1922 his films are banned from the screen by the industry's in-house censor Will Hays, although he is permitted to direct, and produces comedies for Educational and Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO) under the pseudonym William Goodrich (Buster Keaton had suggested Will B. Good).

Keaton's strangest, almost Pirandello-like film *The Playhouse* (Edward Cline/Buster Keaton) contains a scene set in a deserted theatre, in which every occupant, from audience members to dancing girls to performing monkeys, bears his face.

Mack Sennett moves his production to Pathé; his greatest new discovery is Harry Langdon, his biggest star (arguably) Ben Turpin.

1922 *Cops* (Edward Cline/Buster Keaton), perhaps *the* great comedy anxiety dream, is produced. The fact that Keaton's character is killed off at the end of the film only adds to its air of Kafkaesque absurdity and menace.

Mabel Normand is called on to testify during the investigation of the (still unsolved) murder of Hollywood director William Desmond.

Harold Lloyd makes the move to feature-length comedy in *Grandma's Boy* (Fred Newmeyer), following the four-reel *A Sailor-Made Man* (Fred Newmeyer, 1921).

1923 *Safety Last* (Fred Newmeyer/Sam Taylor) is the source of silent film's most iconic image, the man on the clock.

Buster Keaton makes the jump to features, albeit cautiously, with the episodic Griffith parody *The Three Ages* (Edward Cline/Buster Keaton), specifically shot to be able to be released as three separate shorts if audience reaction was negative.

The Extra Girl (F. Richard Jones) is Mabel Normand's last film with producer Mack Sennett, best remembered for her scenes with the runaway lion.

Harry Langdon makes his first shorts for Mack Sennett: *Picking Peaches* (Erie Kenton) and *Smile Please* (Roy Del Ruth).

J. Edgar Hoover orders the FBI to open a secret file on the activities of Charlie Chaplin.

1924 Keaton's greatest film about film, *Sherlock, Jr.* (Buster Keaton), is produced. Another masterpiece, *The Navigator* (Donald Crisp/Buster Keaton), is released the same year.

After a second scandal, this involving her chauffeur shooting a guest at a Hollywood party, Mabel Normand (whose films are actively banned in some states) retires from the screen at the age of 31. She makes four more shorts between 1926 and 1927 before her premature death to tuberculosis in 1927.

1925 Harold (Lloyd)'s suit disintegrates during the 'fall frolic' in *The Freshman* (Sam Taylor/Fred Newmeyer).

His Wooden Wedding (Leo McCarey): For my money, the best (and oddest) film starring Charley Chase, who had started off with Sennett, teamed with Oliver Hardy at King Bee, and eventually became an accomplished comedy director and star in his own right in the 1920s. His persona is no more than that of a breezy, dapper young man, but many of his films are stranger and more risqué than his contemporaries. In *His Wooden Wedding* he plays a groom-to-be obsessed with the fear that his bride might only have one leg. The dream sequence where even the family dog is one paw down is particularly memorable.

The Gold Rush (Charlie Chaplin) contains the dance of the rolls, the leather boot dinner and the prospector's shack suspended above the void; however, Mack Swain's belief that Chaplin is, in fact, an enormous chicken remains the comedy highlight.

1926 *Hands Up!* is the *other* great American Civil War comedy (alongside *The General*) and the best known work of Raymond Griffith, one of silent film's lost greats. Griffith plays a dapper, sleepy, easy going gentleman, prone to doze off in the middle of the excitement, and generally unflappable even in the most bizarre of circumstances. In *Hands Up!* he escapes from a firing squad by painting a replica of himself on the wall, leaving only a note 'Till we meet again'. A childhood illness meant that his voice could not rise above a whisper, effectively ending his career with the coming of sound. He can be glimpsed for the last time on screen as a dying soldier in *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Lewis Milestone, 1931).

The Strong Man (Frank Capra) is the feature debut of both Harry Langdon and director Frank Capra.

1927 *The General* (Clyde Bruckman/Buster Keaton) includes the destruction of the Union locomotive on the Rock River Bridge, re-enacted with real locomotive and real bridge, and the single most expensive shot in all of silent film.

Stan Laurel teams with Oliver Hardy for Hal Roach at RKO: *Duck Soup* (Fred Guiol, 1927), *Sailors, Beware* (Fred Guiol, 1927) and *Flying Elephants* (Frank Butler, 1928) are among their early work.

In a similar move, the squat Polly Moran, who started work as a comedienne with Sennett at Keystone, is teamed with the Amazonian Marie Dressler for a series of comedy shorts.

It (Clarence Badger) is Clara Bow's most lovable film and the finest romantic comedy of the twenties.

The Jazz Singer (Alan Crosland) is released on the 6 October in New York.

1928 *The Circus* is now widely seen as one of Chaplin's finest films, although it is never mentioned in his autobiography.

Harold Lloyd's final silent comedy, *Speedy* (Ted Wilde), is released.

Buster Keaton signs with MGM and, despite well documented production difficulties, completes *The Cameraman* (Edward Sedgewick), his last great film.

1929 *Big Business* (Hal Roach) is arguably Laurel and Hardy's finest hour, wherein they methodically demolish James Finlayson's suburban home in a series of tit-for-tat indignities and injuries.

Welcome Danger (Ted Wilde), Harold Lloyd's latest, is pulled by the studio and reshot in sound. The follow up, *Feet First* (Clyde Bruckman, 1930), attempts (mainly unsuccessfully) to rework *Safety Last* (1923) for the new medium.

Harry Langdon, by now at the stub end of his career, makes a number of sound films for Hal Roach. If anything, his odd, thin voice makes them even more eerie (funny-peculiar rather than anything else) than his silent films. By the 1930s he is working as a gagman for Laurel and Hardy.

1930 Keaton's first sound film, *Free and Easy* (Edward Sedgewick), is a personal catastrophe but a commercial success.

1931 *City Lights* (Charlie Chaplin) showcases a synchronized score (also by Chaplin) and sound effects but no speech. It also contains perhaps the funniest opening and saddest last shot in all of American cinema.

1933 After returning to the screen in a series of shorts for Vitaphone, Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle signs a deal with Warner Brothers to make his first feature-length comedy for a decade, but dies of a heart attack the same night.

Buster Keaton is fired by MGM.

Mack Sennett declares bankruptcy.

1936 *Modern Times* (Charlie Chaplin): Chaplin's last (nearly) silent film and farewell to the Little Fellow, the Tramp. His next role would be the serial killer in *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947).

1938 After *Professor Beware* (Elliot Nugent), Harold Lloyd announces his retirement from the screen, choosing instead to concentrate on his keen interest in nude women and 3D photography.

1940 *The Great Dictator* (Charlie Chaplin) is Chaplin's first true 'talkie'.

1947 Preston Sturges coaxes Harold Lloyd out of retirement to make *The Sin of Harold Dibbledock,* opening where *The Freshman* (1925) left off. Lloyd disowns its 'cynicism' and obsession with 'smart dialogue' at the expense of comedy.

1952 In *Limelight* (Charles Chaplin), Chaplin and Keaton are teamed for a vaudeville routine for the first and only time.

After leaving the US to promote *Limelight* in Europe, Charlie Chaplin finds his re-entry visa rescinded by the Immigration and Naturalization Department on the grounds of 'gross moral and financial turpitude'. Chaplin vows never to return.

1955 Publication of Mack Sennett's notoriously unreliable memoirs, *The King of Comedy,* 'as told to' Cameron Shipp.

1961 After protests, it is decided not to award Chaplin a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

1964 Publication of *My Autobiography* (note the possessive pronoun) by Charles Chaplin.

1965 Buster Keaton appears (albeit only shot from behind) in the Samuel Beckett scripted *Film* (Burr Smidt). The Venice Film Festival hosts a large-scale appreciation of Keaton's life and work, leading to his critical revaluation and revival.

1966 Buster Keaton appears in *The Scribe,* produced (ironically, given his incredibly perilous stunt work in his youth) for the Constructions Safety Association of Ontario. He dies the same year.

1967 *A Countess from Hong Kong* (Charles Chaplin) is Chaplin's last film, starring Marlon Brando and Sophia Loren.

1968 Publication of Kevin Brownlow's *The Parade's Gone By,* a seminal collection of interviews with silent cinema's great practitioners.

1972 Charlie Chaplin returns to the US to receive an honorary Academy Award.

1977 Death of Charlie Chaplin at the age of 87. His body is stolen by grave robbers in 1978 but recovered 11 weeks later.

2012 *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius) becomes the first (predominantly) silent film to win Best Picture at the Academy Awards since *Wings* (1928) (pedants may like to note that F.W. Murnau's sublime (and silent) *Tabu* (1931) won the award for Best Cinematography in 1932)).

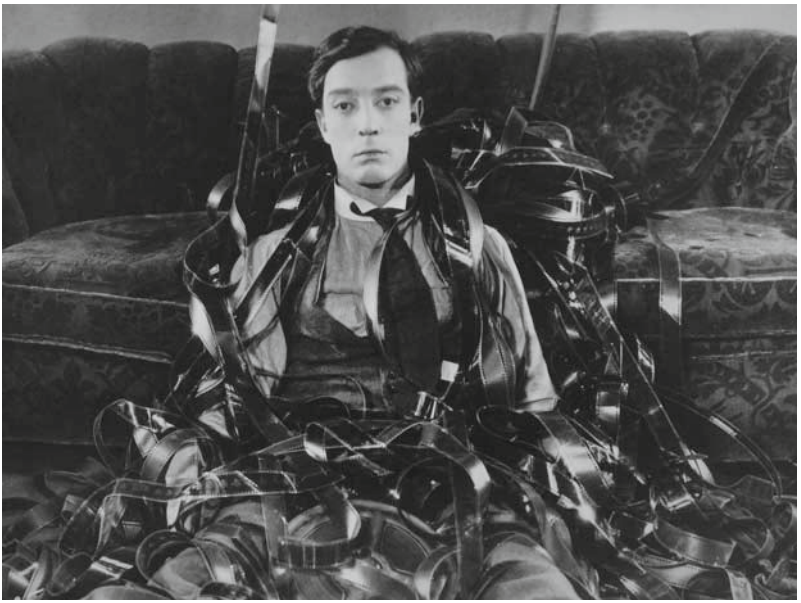

Figure 1.1 *Sherlock, Jr.* (Buster Keaton, 1924), publicity shot.
Source: Buster Keaton Productions/Associated First National Pictures.

1

Introducing American Silent Film Comedy: Clowns, Conformity, Consumerism

The US's great spree of the 1920s, seen by many at the time as a cultural surrender to indulgence and excess, was overseen by a succession of rather dull, earnest, Republican presidents, of whom by far the most sober and earnest was Calvin Coolidge, the erstwhile 'Silent Cal', noted for his dour, prudent, almost obsessively sensible and parsimonious personality. Worried that the public's perception of him as a humourless bookkeeper was damaging to the party, Coolidge's advisors hired Edward Bernays, show-business impresario, godfather of the new black art of Public Relations and Sigmund Freud's nephew, to add lustre to his presidential image. Bernays's first response was to photograph Coolidge posing alongside several of his movie-star clients; but, if anything, this stunt only succeeded in making the president appear even more stiff and awkward. Undeterred, Bernays dressed Coolidge first in full cowboy gear, then in Indian headdress, before finally shooting him milking cows on his family farm, none of which succeeded in linking Coolidge's air of propriety to the US's mythic past. Finally, however, Bernays's agency hit upon a plan: they installed in the White House a mechanical horse, which was electrically operated and capable of high speeds, and they filmed Coolidge proudly mounted atop it, dressed in a Stetson hat and (apparently) whooping and hollering. When Bernays placed the story in the press, reporting that the president rode his steed up to three times a day, Coolidge was widely ridiculed. But, as ever, the temperate, sedate Cal took it all in good part: 'Well, it's good for people to laugh', he dryly noted (Evans, 1998, p. 203).

The image of the straight-laced and hide-bound Silent Cal spinning and cheering atop his mechanical colt has entered history, and acts as a kind of guiding image for this book, both a study of silent film and an exploration of the shift from Puritan restraint to materialist excess in

the early years of the twentieth century. While Coolidge himself was almost pathologically prudent and parsimonious in his dealings, his pro-business policies nonetheless ushered in a new era of luxury and excess; it is this mass cultural St Vitas dance (St Vitas also being the patron saint of travelling entertainers) which provides the context to this study.

In 1925, Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, who would, of course, go on to become Coolidge's successor in the White House, spoke to the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World in Houston, stating 'You have taken on the job of creating desire. You have still another job – creating good will in order to make desire stand hitched. In economics the torments of desire in turn create demand, and from demand we create production, and thence around the cycle we land with increased standards of living'.[1] This idea of 'hitching' desire to the marketplace, deploying its 'torments' as a kind of internal combustion engine, man driven like a wound-up toy or spinning top, appears again and again in the business rhetoric of the decade. The market is referred to as a kind of perpetual motion device, transporting goods from factory to worker in one continuous loop. It also spills over into the film culture of the decade: the manic choreography of racing torsos in Mack Sennet's Keystone movies; the staccato judder of Charlie Chaplin's tramp; Buster Keaton's revolving house in *One Week* (1920), a mass cultural dream of speed, machinery and consumption. And it is indeed cinema, and its relation to the new consumer culture, which provides the subtext to Hoover's speech.

The engineers of desire

At this point we return to the work of Edward Bernays, by now one of Hoover's key speech-writers, as well as being one of the most important (if least known) architects of Western consumer culture. Bernays's links to his Uncle Sigmund are central here: Bernays's family had moved to the US when he was only one, but Bernays remained close to his famous uncle throughout his life, and was, perhaps, the first thinker to fully grasp the economic as well as the philosophical implications of psychoanalysis. Bernays started off as a Broadway press agent (his first success was the promotion of a dubiously educational play about the dangers of venereal disease entitled *Damaged Goods* (1901)) before acting as head of publicity for turns as famous as the Great Caruso (singer Enrico Caruso, 1873–1921) and Diaghilev's *Ballet Russes* (1909–1929). In 1917, he joined George Creel's Committee on Public Information, the

government-sponsored propaganda organization which was instrumental in the selling of the US's actions in the First World War. Afterwards, Bernays returned to the fame game, concentrating on movie-star clients, including Clara Bow, as well as establishing the new field of 'public relations', a science that he regarded as rooted in the discoveries of his Uncle Siggy, whose works he also promoted in the US.

What linked all these disparate business enterprises was Bernays's crucial idea that the mass media might be used as a tool to pacify and control the irrational and voracious unconscious of the great American public, a public which in Bernays's writing appears as a barbaric, destructive crowd. Like many influential intellectuals of the period (including Walter Lippmann, Harold Mencken and, of course, Freud himself) Bernays was suspicious of the very concept of democracy. Man could not be expected to make rational political decisions, he believed, because man was not governed by rational, lucid or reasonable impulses. Rather, civilization was merely the fragile (and temporary) subjugation of primeval sexual and aggressive forces, primitive reminders of our animal past that could erupt at any point. The mass slaughter of the trenches, the rise of anti-Semitic fascism, the angry Bolshevik mob: all these seemed to Bernays to vindicate his position, the carnal house of history mocking the rational, technocratic utopia which seemed briefly tenable at the dawn of the twentieth century. But unlike his pessimistic European uncle, the American millionaire Bernays had a solution: if these unconscious desires could be linked to the marketplace, urges both stimulated and satiated by images, products and luxury goods, then mass culture itself could be used as a tool to domesticate and pacify the energies of the unconscious. The masses had to be scientifically managed, public opinion strictly controlled; Bernays called this 'the engineering of consent'.[2] The key to this was not reason, but the irrational forces psychoanalysis had dragged into the light.

After all, his uncle's theories also provided a theoretical justification for Bernays's distrust of the masses and their pack mentality. In his 1921 essay 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego', Freud argued that the mob was connected with 'all that is evil in the human mind', advancing the notion that, when safely hidden with the massed ranks, man succumbed to an aggressive 'desublimation', shedding any last vestments of civilized behaviour (Freud, 2004, p. 25). The crowd, Freud wrote, resembled the destructive energies of the id, throwing off the chains of repression in accordance with the most primitive of urges. Acting like vengeful children, eager to exact retribution on a civilization that demanded such a severe renunciation of their drives, the crowd

infantilized its members: akin to school children cooped up on a wet day, these dangerous anarchic energies would, he believed, ultimately find expression only via mindless acts of destruction. Elias Canetti, writing in 1931, wrote that the horde 'hungers to seize and engulf everything within reach. It wants to experience for itself the strongest possible feeling of its animal force and passion. It is naturally destructive, enjoying the demolition of homes and objects apparently as an end in itself' (Carey, 1992, p. 30). Moreover, a second, and perhaps even more dangerous phenomenon, would then assert itself: having regressed to the status of children, these demonic infants would then seek out a father figure, a strong leader or 'Caesar' to lead them. Having already abdicated all responsibility for their actions by succumbing to the mindless drives of the id, their next step would be to dissolve the discriminating ego forever, seeking absorption within the adoring crowds gathered at the feet of *der fuehrer* or Uncle Joe. In the light of this veneration of the father, democracy seemed too weak a dam to hold back such terrifying psychic forces; what was needed, according to Bernays, was a new technocratic elite, 'a highly educated class of opinion-moulding tacticians constantly at work, analysing the social terrain and adjusting the mental scenery from which the public mind, with its limited intellect, derives its opinions' (Ewen, 1996, p. 10). And what was this 'mental scenery' composed of? Movies, adverts, catalogues, billboards: the 'hieroglyphic civilization' (the phrase is Vachel Lindsay's) of American consumerism.

Hired by a tobacco company to promote the idea of women smoking, Bernays orchestrated a highly original press campaign that played upon the idea of the cigarette as a symbol of phallic power. At a suffragette protest in 1919, Bernays hired a number of pretty women to be photographed suggestively removing a packet of cigarettes from beneath their garter belts and lighting up in public. The sexual charge of this image (as well as the linking of cigarettes with male freedom) excited the public imagination and increased sales overnight. Imagery could also be deployed which drew upon sexual anxiety and discomfort. For example, Bernays was paid by Dixie Cups to promote the sales of disposable plastic cups, and he did so by linking the imagery of an over-flowing cup with subliminal images of vaginas and sexual disease – obviously those months spent promoting *Damaged Goods* had not been in vain. Suddenly, Freud's exegesis of dream symbolism seemed like the answer to every salesman's dream, a way to bypass rational reservations and access primitive wants and fears directly. However, Bernays was interested in more than simply making money: he was concerned with the preservation of capitalism itself.

After the First World War, the unprecedented economic boom suddenly created fears of mass over-production. The US was now producing vastly more goods than its domestic market could handle, or that war-ravaged Europe could afford. The answer was to convince American consumers to buy more, to shift consumption from what one needed to what one desired. Bernays argued that people had to be trained to desire, to want new things before the old things had even started to wear out. This, in turn, required a complete transformation of the American attitude towards money: Americans had to think of buying not as an extravagance but as their patriotic duty. Hoarding money as 'savings' was seen as a throwback to a repressive Puritanism (anally retentive in Freud's view): modern US required its dollars as rocket fuel (Susman, 1984, p. 111). Increasingly, this was a society that defined itself in terms of abundance rather than scarcity; the pioneer struggle to subdue a wild continent was replaced by indulgence, leisure and pleasure. Who still needed to stoically 'make-do', to scrimp and save, or neglect one's own personal happiness in the communal project of building a new civilization? Hard work and self-denial belonged to the past: now it was the turn of personal desire and self-gratification, qualities which needed to be stimulated in order that the economy which permitted such laxity and ease could continue to grow.

To increase expenditure and demand, advertisers made consumerism an expression of one's self. They promoted buying one's personality off the peg, as it were, or defining oneself not through one's family, hometown, religion or job, but rather through one's clothes, home, car or lifestyle. Whereas goods were once marketed in terms of their use or durability, advertisers in the 1920s increasingly linked their products to the idealized lifestyles of the young, beautiful and rich: what counted was not the product *per se*, but the lifestyle or emotional connotations attached to it. This, then, was the great discovery of the age: that we buy not what we need, but rather what contributes to a fantasy version of who we long to be. Both the movie screen and the department store window offered distorted reflections of who one might become – a new identity, a new beginning, a new *you* – a notion, of course, rooted in the mythic promises of the US itself.

But Bernays was thinking even larger than that. While Europe seemed to be drifting towards either fascism or communism, either stripe defined by brutal, anti-bourgeois mobs, the American dream seemed to offer an alternative, a union of entertainment and consumerism, film and advertising. 'The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in

a democratic society', wrote Bernays in *Propaganda* in 1928, in a chapter headed, significantly, 'Organizing Chaos'. 'Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country' (Bernays, 1928, p. 9). And who made up this invisible government? Advertisers, marketing strategists and, crucially, film-makers. Scientific studies carried out on children in the early 1920s suggested that 'motion pictures affect sleep, their vital processes, their supply of information and misinformation, their attitudes and their conduct' (Doob, 1935, p. 376). Could film, then, make compliant children of us all? After all, cinema also manufactured an emphatic state of *Mitspielen*, or nervous excitement, 'polarizing' the mental field: 'It is almost impossible for him [the viewer] to avoid the picture', Bernays wrote: 'the darkened room, with the screen as the only point of illumination, compels him to be orientated toward that screen' (Doob, 1935, p. 374). In the movie theatre, Georges Duhamel noted, 'I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images' (Benjamin, 1992, p. 231). But what kind of images were these? Motion pictures, like other branches of advertising, appeared to Bernays as a kind of collective visualization of desire. 'When the herd must think for itself', he noted contemptuously, 'it does so by means of clichés, pat words or images which stand for a whole group of ideas or expressions' (Bernays, 1928, p. 51). Thus, just as the mechanics of projection reorganized perception, so the flow of images could also reorganize the object of desire.

As Leonard Doob noted in his 1935 work, *Propaganda: Its Psychology and Technique*,

> Similarly as the sailor on a lonely waste of sea seeks his consolation in brandy and the soldier during the war his in nicotine, in like manner does the worker from the factory, the department store, and the office so often find refuge in the movies after forsaking his treadmill, because in general movies offer him precisely what he is seeking: fantasy and sensation, in contrast to his own monotonous life, and illusory transplantation into a land of wishes containing luxury and riches, the erotic and the exotic . . . .
>
> (Doob, 1935, p. 374)

When asked about the Soviet threat, pro-business booster Bruce Barton could answer confidently: 'Give every Russian a copy of the latest Sears-Roebuck Catalogue and the address of the nearest Sears-Roebuck outlet'; Henry Ford went even further, situating consumerism and

mechanization at the heart of what seemed an airtight system, a closed loop wherein the worker toils ceaselessly on the conveyor belt in order to purchase the very goods that come off it (Susman, 1984, p. 128). For Ford, this social control seemed the antithesis of the anarchy breaking out elsewhere in the world (he famously could not bear surprises, and demanded that publishers send him copies of *Little Orphan Annie* in advance so that he could read his paper unperturbed), the American way propounded in after-work classes set up by his 'Sociological Department'. Bernays also believed that the fundamental mechanics of escapism and desire could be used to tranquillize the masses, keeping them docile and happy. Sexual or aggressive impulses could be sublimated via idealized images and thereby managed and controlled, turned into advertising images, motion-picture scripts, collective dreams. Walter Lippmann in his seminal 1922 work *On Public Opinion* argued that it was the task of 'image-makers' to reconcile consumers to this new social reality, that narcissism could act as an instrument of profound social control. Like Bernays, he believed that as long as new products were constantly created to both stimulate and satisfy desire, this model could be used as the basis of both economic and social stability. After all, if our very sense of who we are – or rather who we most want to be – is dependent upon our buying the ticket, purchasing the product or internalizing the image, then consumption becomes the very keystone of our existence: I Shop Therefore I Am. 'Men are rarely aware of the real reasons which motivate their actions', wrote Freud's nephew. 'A man may believe that he buys a motor-car because, after careful study of the technical features of all makes on the market, he has concluded that this is best. He is almost certainly fooling himself' (Bernays, 1928, p. 51). No, Bernays argues, in reality cars are sold because of fantasies of freedom, sexuality, wealth, 'evidence of his success in business, or a means of pleasing his wife' (Bernays, 1928, p. 52). The persona we present to the world ultimately becomes our own mode of recognizing who we are; the ad maketh the star, then maketh the man.

Bernays was one of the first entrepreneurs to understand the importance of product placement in films (the mere appearance of a brand of perfume in a DeMille flick was worth millions of dollars) and to employ the idea of celebrity endorsement: his company sold Clara Bow eye-drops, for example. But far more important was his idea of mobilizing the essential mechanics of anxiety and desire through mediated images, images which, he believed, accessed the unconscious in a far more direct way than language. Psychologists taught of the existence of 'hard-wired responses in human beings that function as a result of

the visual cues to which they are exposed' (Berger, 2004, p. 10). Fears, wants, irrational impulses, the rejection of reality and regression into infantile fantasy: all these could be managed, almost invisibly, by the entertainment industry. Sexual and violent drives, inimical to civilization, could be redirected to socially and economically productive ends; all the public had to do was to learn to dream other people's dreams.

Perception management and the American way

Lippmann argued that, in the wake of the First World War, there was now a great need to re-order social images in order to fit the new reality of a new world; this, in turn, necessitated the manipulation of how people *saw* things, a transformation of vision itself. Cinema certainly provided a shop window for mass-produced goods. But perhaps it could do much more, working to stabilize a culture's collective unconscious, creating a kind of rest cure for the collective shell-shock of both modernization and the First World War – not for nothing was the Roxy in New York known as 'The Cathedral of the Motion Picture' or the theatre on 55th Street nicknamed 'The Sanctuary'. Progressive reformer Paul W. Goldberg praised slapstick comedy as a salve for the 'mental stress and emotional fatigue' of twentieth-century life with its 'dull grey colours, straight lines and sharp angles' (Jenkins, 1992, p. 45). Could film help tame and domesticate the common throng, transforming the crowd into a passive, paying audience? Images of an angry crowd or mob – amorphous, irrational, violent – haunt Lippmann's *On Public Opinion* every bit as much as they dominate Bernays's essays on public opinion and propaganda, the common herd gone feral, a barbarous mass lurking at the gate. But would film ultimately pacify or enflame?

Interestingly, Lippmann, a one-time student of William James and enthusiastic member of the socialist party, had started off as a muckraking journalist, famous for his attacks on corporate robber barons and the US's impotent trust laws. By the early 1920s, however, the tone of his political pronouncements had shifted markedly; now his writings warned of imminent social breakdown and a massive wave of violent instability, the toppling of the Tsar in Russia in someway foreshadowing the ransacking of Wall Street back home. But what had happened in Lippmann's political education to bring about such a change? Crucially, he had worked alongside Edward Bernays in the Committee for Public Information (CPI), set up by President Wilson in 1917 to persuade a suspicious public of the merits of a shift from his election-winning anti-war platform to full American military involvement in what was ostensibly

a European conflict. Within the CPI, fears that immigrants (especially those from Central Europe and thus on the wrong side in the war) and the working classes would not support such a move merged with more general anxieties regarding Bolshevism and anarchism. The committee's job was thus to bolster public patriotism, and to come up with ways to manage social discontent and resentment, especially among 'the lower orders'. The proclaimed aim of the CPI was 'to mobilize the propaganda skills of artists, intellectuals, journalists and those working in the motion picture industry' in order to channel the popular sentiments of the American public in the correct, pre-determined direction (Ewen, 1996, p. 108). The perceived importance of moving pictures led to the creation of a dedicated Division of Films for the medium regarded by CPI boss George Creel as 'an extraordinarily charismatic and universal form of communication', and for that reason one particularly effective in reaching out to a non-English speaking, urban, immigrant audience – precisely those the CPI feared most. Film's ability to galvanize emotions and evoke intense audience identification was seen as particularly commodious for the committee's end: films were 'vehicles for leading the eye and mind toward specific ways of seeing a story unfold' (Ewen, 1996, p. 52). In this respect, the CPI came to treat the American public as an enormous audience, a vast (and passive) body of spectators, extremely receptive to visual stimuli.

Writings on early film repeatedly stress the bewitching nature of film, its ability to induce an altered state of consciousness, to gently release us from the bounds of order or logic. As the *America Encyclopaedia of Progress* (Loomis, 1915, p. 206) notes: 'Here at last is the magic of childhood – appearances, apparitions, objects possessed of power of movement and intelligence [...] For the motion picture does for us what no other thing can do save a drug'. The model that the CPI most readily turned to was D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which had electrified audiences in both the North and South in a manner unlike any motion picture before it. During screenings, audiences had wept openly at the death of the 'little sister' at the hands of the murderous 'Negro Gus', cheered the subsequent formation of the Ku Klux Klan, and whistled and hollered wildly during the Klan's ride to the rescue (synchronized to Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*) at the movie's end. Crucially, Griffith's movie convinced audiences (including Northern ones) of the validity of the Southern cause by means of powerful emotion rather than reason; even those naturally unsympathetic to the Lost Cause (the post-war Confederacy's attempt to come to terms with reconstruction and defeat) found themselves sentimentally overwhelmed by

Griffith's masterly manipulation of narrative, scale and spectacle.[3] Moreover, the film's implicit anxieties regarding miscegenation (in particular the motif of the *potential* rape of pure 'white' women by bestial 'black' men) evoked an enormous unconscious emotional charge, and libidinal, political and sentimental energies were marshalled by the film in an unprecedented manner. The race riots and lynching evoked by Griffith's film, if anything, gave further credence to the CPI's brief: here was proof that film could energize huge bodies of people, reducing the great American populace to either tears of anguish or howls of rage. Inspired, the Division of Film came up with a list of visual and emotional stimuli that could then be employed by the Scenarios Department to aid the propaganda campaign: crosses, mothers, babies, rapes, ravaged nuns, gross images of the hulking Hun.[4] The war was over before the CPI could discover if such pictures could have any effect (as we shall see in Chapter 8, Griffith's own First World War propaganda picture *Hearts of the World* (1918) was released too late, and had to be watered down by post-war censors seeking reconciliation, much to Griffith's chagrin). However, the notion of unconscious stimuli would feed directly into the post-war need to increase production, as business analyst Roger Bahson noted in 1921: 'the war taught us the power of propaganda. Now when we have anything to sell to the American people, we know how to sell it' (Ewen, 1996, p. 31).

Contemporaries of Lippmann, such as Randolph Bourne, condemned the use of the 'powers of unreason' and the 'closing of the right-thinking mind', but Lippmann consoled himself with the belief that he had more lofty aims in mind, namely the preservation of American society itself. Re-reading Gustave Le Bon's hugely influential *The Crowd* (1895) – the source of many of the ideas employed in Freud's own study of group behaviour – Lippmann came across a key passage on the 'imagination of crowds'. There, Le Bon argues (in a phrase that Freud would later parrot) that the masses 'can only think in images', responding readily to fantasy or illusion but disdainful of hard facts or pragmatic logic. Le Bon likened the mind of the crowd to 'the slides of a magic lantern show': a series of discordant, emotionally rich images with no clear rational connection between them. 'It is only images that terrify or attract [the crowd]', Le Bon concludes, 'and become motivators of action. For this reason, theatrical representations, in which the image is shown in its most clearly visible state, always have an enormous influence on crowds. Whoever can supply them with illusions is easily their master; whoever attempts to destroy their illusions is always their victim' (Ewen, 1996, p. 142).

Lippmann, with his background in print journalism, readily concurred with all of this. Experience taught him that the public responded not to the way things really were, but to 'the pictures in their head [*sic*]' (Lippmann, 1922, p. 27). What one might term 'commonly held reality' or 'common knowledge' was in truth an amalgamation of stock clichés, dramatic situations and visual cues. These were provided not by direct experience but rather were manufactured via the new forms of mass mediation. Thus a good 60 years before postmodernism, Lippmann was already talking about a virtual reality (or mediascape) made up of 'the medium of fictions' – adverts, press stories and movie-made happy endings. People don't really think, he argued, but rather act in accordance with 'the habit of their eyes', falling back on a series of stock assumptions and stereotypes drawn from a shared mental template owing more to shared myths than the real ways of the world (Lippmann, 1922, p. 27). Particularly interesting is Lippmann's stress on the *visual*, his belief in the existence of habitual ways of seeing, a kind of ocular filter through which all experiences must be passed. Lippmann had long ago given up on the idea of educating Americans to live up to their democratic responsibilities; now he talked of 'perception management', the manipulation of this new visual reality by the great and the good. And once again a line from Le Bon came to his rescue: 'symbols', wrote Le Bon in *The Crowd*, 'provide the fortress that would protect the forces of order from the mounting tide of chaos' (Ewen, 1996, p. 143). In other words, if the great unwashed masses respond only to illusion (rather than political reason) then what other recourse is there but to employ illusion in order to maintain an all-too-fragile sense of lawful harmony?

Like his old bosses in the CPI, Lippmann saw cinema as the source of 'unparalleled powers of persuasion', with moving pictures 'the most effective passageways into inner-life' (Lippmann, 1922, p. 162). The key, as he saw it, lay in audience *identification*: an empathetic (yet unwilled) association with the wishes or anxieties portrayed onscreen. 'In the recesses of our being we must step out of the audience and on to the stage', he wrote in *Public Opinion*, and thus become an emotional participant, sharing vicariously in the passions, struggles and eventual triumph of the hero silhouetted on the silver screen (Lippmann, 1922, p. 166). In this way, the dramatic resolution of the conflict onscreen would also provide the means for reconciling and taming social pressures and conflicts in the wider world off-camera. After all, what better medium was there for the creation of a fully functioning virtual environment than that of the moving picture? Images, Lippmann wrote, 'come, we

imagine, directly to us without human meddling, and they are the most effortless food for the mind conceivable [. . .] Without more trouble than is needed to stay awake, the result which your imagination is always aiming at is reeled off on the screen. The shadowy idea becomes vivid' (Lipmann, 1922, pp. 91–2). While words imply debate (and thus dissent), the emotional charge of images denote resolution, he argued; in order to reap the emotional reward offered by film one must willingly suspend one's disbelief, give in to the 'hypnotic' (probably the most repeated phrase in all the writings of Lippmann, Bernays and Le Bon) trance of the silver screen. Ultimately, Lippmann believed, those who control the flow of images control a society's imaginative reality. And if American politicians, businessmen and artists were unwilling to step in, then (as in Europe) some other, more dictatorial or demagogic force would. 'He who captures the symbols by which public feeling is for the moment contained, controls by that much the approaches of public policy', Lippmann warned; better Sears-Robuck than Hitler, Hollywood escapism than the blood-lust of the pack (Lippmann, 1922, p. 234).

Dream factories and pleasure palaces

Thus, when it came to the centrality of the motion-picture industry to the American imagination, the stakes were high. The poet Vachel Lindsay saw the power of film as socially dynamic, even potentially explosive; hence the fact that film had to be contained and tamed by being housed in respectable 'picture-houses', modelled at the end of the 1910s after banks, courthouses and public libraries, all edifying neo-classical piles (Lindsay, 2000, p. 161). However, as the 1920s progressed, theatres changed; unlike either the noisy, dirty shacks of the Nickelodeon period or the dull civic architecture of early picture-houses, movie theatres in the 1920s became ever more ornate and fanciful, exotic havens of wealth and splendour, opening up a new sphere of glamour to the common man. Opulence seemed within the reach of millions of city dwellers for the first time, with movie theatres emulating the luxurious dwellings and hotels of the untouchably rich. Swathed in rich tapestries, deep rugs, gleaming mirrors, gilt-furnished staircases and pristine powder rooms, such palaces seemed to erase the space between oneself and the screen. Specially commissioned exotic displays made it possible for one to leave the real world (and one's sense of self) behind and step within the frame of the dream itself. The space between aspiration and possibility seemed no more than the price of a ticket, the

cost of refurnishing one's apartment, of dressing and speaking like one's idol; these picture palaces concretely embodied the consumer ideal of purchasing a new self – the American dream transubstantiated as material goods. Could this consumerism then be used, alongside film, as a device to regulate an unruly populace's equally unruly unconscious? Was film's hold upon the audience's emotions so strong that a union of idealized images of desire and a system of conspicuous consumption could be used to stabilize a chaotic and threatening world? And yet, for other critics and censor boards, such emotional indulgences seemed (at best) to be playing with fire. They asked: what if the new medium didn't control desire but only exasperated it? As early as 1898 the great progressive Jane Adams had warned that 'the newly awakened senses are appealed to by all that is gaudy and sensual [...] the result is as dangerous as possible' (Jenkins, 1996, p. 46). Could order truly be built from fantasy and want? Or would this potent mixture destabilize and overwhelm the pragmatic work ethic that had made the US so strong in the first place? In short, did the market truly sublimate unconscious desire, or rather, in a cultural and economic sense, unleash it?

Store-crazy

Even the most casual perusal of the popular press of the period turns up any number of scare stories of crazed, pleasure-seeking crowds, whether they be respectable women transformed into hysterical kleptomaniacs, children corrupted by the dingy interiors of foul Nickelodeons, or working men 'unmanned' by a new feminine age of mass consumption. More specifically, article after article seized upon the image of a pathological feminine horde, trading blows in department store sales, hysterically fainting over Valentino's coffin or seduced by their unchecked desire for sensual luxury. And throughout all of this permissive extravagance, film appeared central to the debate. Ever since the early days of the Nickelodeon, the main audience for moving pictures had been women and children, accompanied by warnings that such entertainment was unhealthy, sedentary and morally debilitating – an indulgence in a feminized world of idle fancy and make-believe. In 1907, the *Chicago Tribune* damned movies as 'without a redeeming feature to warrant their existence [...] merely ministering to the lowest passion of childhood'. The same year, Chicago set up the first censorship board to protect the general public 'against the evil influence of obscene and immoral presentations' (Mintz, 1999, p. 13). Many of the early attempts to curb the mesmeric licentiousness of early cinema are

now seen as comically absurd – in 1908 the Massachusetts Film Board passed a law necessitating that all films must be suspended and the house lights switched on every 15 minutes in order to prevent blindness and allow enflamed passions to cool – but as Ian Christie notes, this wave of condemnation directed towards early film parlours (insalubrious dens of illicit lovemaking and filthy foreign practices) actively threatened the continuation of the industry as the Nickelodeon boom began to wind down around 1908 (Christie, 1994, p. 52). Of course, the subtext to such sentiments was very often xenophobic (campaigns specifically orchestrated against immigrant audiences in down-at-heel areas), or misogynist, linked to concerns regarding the attendance of unchaperoned, unaccompanied women risking either the perfidious claws of white-slavers or else indulging their own unacceptable tastes for vice and titillation.

Indeed, it is of crucial importance to situate this fear of the masses in terms of class, gender and ethnicity. After all, the granddaddy of such sentiments, Le Bon's *The Crowd*, written at the end of the nineteenth century was itself a clear response to massive population increases (as was José Ortega y Gasset's 1830 essay, 'The Revolt of the Masses', a clear predecessor) as well as widespread fears that the working classes were about to storm the barricades (thanks to this new-fangled fashion for democratic suffrage). 'To-day the claims of the masses are becoming more and more sharply defined,' Le Bon wrote,

> and amount to nothing less than a determination to utterly destroy society as it now exists, with a view to making it hark back to that primitive communism which was the natural condition of all human groups before the dawn of civilization. The divine right of the masses is about to replace the divine right of kings.
>
> (Ewen, 1996, p. 66)

Democracy was in truth regression, he preached: while the middle classes were educated and thus able to play a full role in public life, the 'lower orders' were merely ruled by their passions – infantile, irrational and destructive. Although such explicit prejudice is dulled in the writings of Bernays and Lippmann, the assumption remains that a technocratic elite, personally immune to the hallucinogenic power of moving pictures, knows best. After all, the mass is never *us*; the educated are always exempt from incorporation within the horde, even though (to choose one obvious example) the experience of Nazi Germany might well suggest the opposite.

Moreover, as John Carey has argued in *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1992), there is a striking fallacy at the heart of this enochlophobia; although crowds may well act in irrational and violent ways, the direct link between mass culture and 'the hungry crowd' is fundamentally a false comparison. Are audiences sitting quietly in movie theatres, individuals perusing mail-order catalogues at home, or shoppers going about their daily chores, really no more than organisms within a vast collective mob (Carey, 1992, p. 26)? After all, the general populace and the 'mob' or 'crowd' are in no way analogous terms; consumer culture may well atomize and isolate individuals rather than bringing crowds together as an undifferentiated mass. Le Bon had in mind the blood-crazed mobs of the French Revolution, Bernays the irrational anti-Semitism of the Jew-hating pack, but to what extent were either of these analogies appropriate as descriptions of the new modes of communication and consumption of a new media age? By equating 'the masses' (which is to say, most people) with the notion of the angry mob, both Bernays and Lippmann perform an intellectual sleight of hand that in turn justifies the rule of the elite as defence against the *potential* dangers of the people.

Moreover, Le Bon's theory is also tied up with an overwhelming fear of the feminine. 'Crowds everywhere are characterized by their feminine characteristics', he writes. And what are these characteristics? A great hysterical flood, 'extremely suggestible, impulsive, irrational, exaggeratedly emotional, inconsistent, irritable and capable only of thinking in images' (Carey, 1992, p. 27). In her study, *The Gender of Modernity,* Rita Felski stresses how the crowd are described in terms of feminine metaphors of fluidity and liquidity, 'a labile, chaotic and undifferentiated force that threatens the boundaries of autonomous individuality' (Felski, 1995, p. 73). This female crowd finds its apotheosis in images of a seething maelstrom of shoppers, 'an amorphous mass of female corporeality', whose inexorable momentum resembles a river in spate, with hordes of insatiable and excitable women looting the shelves (Felski, 1995, p. 73). On film, the iconic example of this can be found in Harold Lloyd's *Safety Last* (1923), with Harold's store clerk reduced to fending off a voracious mob of frumpish, over-sized harridans, the women driven into a state of delirium by a sale in the haberdashery department. In their insatiable appetite for samples and remnants they literally tear the clothes from Harold's back before attacking him with their great club-like umbrellas (crucially, the few husbands glimpsed are frail, effeminate beings, while the women are huge titanesses, either comically tall or grotesquely broad in the beam – true Amazonian consumers). Although the female horde gain in potency and brute strength,

the men are, in Felski's terms, 'feminized by the castrating effects of an ever more pervasive commodification', the female shopper epitomizing a new age of *female* consumption rather than *male* production (Felski, 1995, p. 62). Elsewhere Andreas Huyssen has argued that it was precisely this infantile, feminine irrationalism of the marketplace, 'the ominous expansion of mass culture through the social realm', that 'high' modernism sought to fight against (Huyssen, 1988, p. 47). In his influential study *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (1986), Huyssen argues that much literary production in the 1920s can be interpreted in terms of a masculine repudiation of 'feminine' aspects of modern life, especially the construction of a new sense of identity from a mixture of consumer choices, lifestyle signifiers and fashion accessories. Thus, central to modernism's masculinist (and misogynist) drive is the implied suggestion that 'mass culture is somehow associated with women, while real, authentic culture remains the prerogative of men' (Huyssen, 1988, p. 47). Shopping, fashion, escapism: all these are coded as female weaknesses, linked to contemporary fears of an increasing feminization or 'softening' of American life. Moreover, fears of total absorption by the crowd are akin to male fears of an all-devouring femaleness (being taken back into the mother's body, psychoanalysis would say), the loss of male power within the engulfing flood of feminized consumerism. After all, Huyssen argues, it is the dreaded loss of the self, the destruction of stable ego-boundaries (where 'I' ends and the 'other' begins) within the mob, which is truly the key to modernism's dread of the masses.

Clowns, conformity, comedy

These central motifs – the dawn of mass culture, a fear of crowds, notions of feminization and infantilization, the idea of an anarchic, potentially destructive immigrant unconscious – are threaded throughout the chapters which follow, and structure the book's engagement with silent film comedy. We begin with the idea of early Keystone comedies as in someway representative of an immigrant 'id' needing to be tamed by an emergent film narrative; move on to consider the impact of mechanization and automatism on Chaplin's comedies, the regressive nature of slapstick comedy in Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle's shorts, changing definitions of the feminine by way of Mabel Normand, Harold Lloyd's engagement with consumer culture; and then move on to consider silent film as times *past* in the Southern films of Buster Keaton and the First World War settings of Harry Langdon. Underpinning all

of this is the assumption, shared by Bernays and his Uncle Sigmund, that the dreamlike images and comic anxieties of silent film in some way bypass rational, logical thought, and instead draw their energy from childhood fears, wishes and modes of thinking. Slapstick movies are in many ways examples of what Freud terms 'pleasurable regression', a sloughing off of adult responsibility, morality or duty; the key question, however, is whether such regression serves the essentially conformist ends of consumer culture (a way of redirecting or sublimating such frustrations or longings) or else represents the return of the repressed, an explosion of anarchy and irrationality among the technocratic systems of supply and demand, the closed loop of production/consumption/entertainment. As Rita Felski notes, Bernays and the ad-men of Fifth Avenue sought, paradoxically, to inscribe a grand narrative of rationalization and machine-like calculability via the creation of dream worlds of desire and longing (Felski, 1995, p. 61). No longer controlled by the checks and balances of the work ethic or self-restraint, wishes were, as we have seen, displaced instead into hedonistic drives, escapist fantasy and the material consolations of consumer culture. In Walter Benjamin's terms, we are dealing with the 're-enchantment, rather than demythication of the social': but just how stable would this dream world prove to be?

Slapstick movies, with their love of destruction, comically uninhibited lust, illogical gags and absurdist anarchy thus provide a kind of test case for Bernays's theories, an exploration of whether such manic energies can be absorbed and tamed by the system (frustration with one's lot harmlessly defused by the simple act of buying a ticket) or whether they illuminate instead the essential irrationality of consumer culture, the transformation of civic duty into boundless desire.

As Rob King points out in his study of the Keystone Film Company, the ostensibly 'timeless' age of silent comedy can only truly be understood in terms of 'a shift from a producer to a consumer economy, the waning of genteel culture and the rise of new managerial classes, the impact of urbanization as both social and sensory phenomena, [and] the displacement of older work habits by a Fordian regime of mechanized production' (King, 2009, p. 3). Silent film comedy thus provides 'a staging round for cultural struggle, both an area of resistance to the dominant culture and a site that the dominant culture seeks to appropriate for its own ends', while slapstick is simultaneously a plebian overthrow of authority and order *and* a Freudian model for displacement and sublimation (King, 2009, p. 7). The central trope for all of this is the notion of slapstick comedy as a form of collective anxiety dream,

a form of 'vernacular modernism' in Eileen Bowser's words, or, as Georg Luckás has it, 'compensatory spectacles of disorder' (King, 2009, p. 48). For Freud, dreams function as the *guardians* of sleep; but what if the sleepwalkers should seize the means of production, collapsing the space between the audience and the screen entirely? Our own irrational, libidinal, celebrity-obsessed culture clearly has its roots in the dawn of mass consumer-culture at the start of the twentieth century; this study examines the ways in which our own mediated, product-driven world can be seen as the consequence of cinematic fever dreams come true.

Figure 2.1 Charlie Chaplin, Marie Dressler and Mabel Normand in *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (Mack Sennett, 1914).
Source: Mack Sennett/Keystone Film Company.

Figure 2.2 Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle in *That Minstrel Man* (Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle, 1914).
Source: Mack Sennett/Keystone Film Company.

2

A Convention of Crazy Bugs: Mack Sennett and the US's Immigrant Unconscious

When André Breton and his surrealist chums were prowling the streets of Nantes and Paris in search of the *merveilleux* in the early 1930s, seeking out chance encounters in cafés, liberating strange objects from flea markets and junkyards, and cutting out absurd newspaper stories and advertisements, they also drew up strict rules for what Breton called 'magnetic' cinema-going. One should 'zigzag' from flea-pit to flea-pit, he commanded (respectable bourgeois theatres were to be avoided unless one disrupted proceedings by bringing in a five-course dinner or arguing loudly), dropping into films randomly (*never* at the start and preferably without learning either the title or the plot of the film) and departing at the first sign of boredom. One should snuffle out 'charged' images from among the drek and the clichés: those strange, unforgettable shots that seemed to somehow fall between the cracks of the film narrative – odd camera angles, over-stated camera movements (Freud would say *over-determined*), spontaneous gestures, outrageously grotesque faces, deliriously excessive emotions or erotic suggestions. Of course, some films were better for this purpose than others: generally American rather than French ones (Breton despised cultural chauvinism), hysterical melodramas, gratuitously violent westerns, cliff-hanger-driven serials (Pearl White was a particular favourite) and most especially slapstick comedies, with their automated aggression, logic-resistant stunts and vulgar debunking of middleclass dignity. For the group, silent film comedy, more than any other film genre (and certainly more than self-consciously artistic or poetic films which the surrealists loathed), seemed to uniquely subvert the spatial, temporal and logical conventions of narrative film, with gags bursting free from any ostensible plot function to claim their own outrageous autonomy. For Breton, such celluloid *objet trouvé* justified cinema's status as 'the only absolutely

modern mystery': plot contrivances that stubbornly failed to make sense, filmic missteps that produced uncomfortably bizarre compositions, extravagantly over-the-top movements (Hammond, 1978, p. 43). Only by wriggling free of the straightjacket of narrative could such images realize their full revolutionary strangeness: one had to unlearn the language of film, assiduously dismantling the medium's apparently seamless mechanisms (editing, identification, narrative). The absurd gag *exploded* film form.

In many ways, twenty-first-century viewers approaching Mack Sennett's comedies for the first time might well be advised to follow Breton's cinematic commandments in a similar manner; after all, the attraction of early film comedies lies precisely in their rude, unhousetrained craziness, their anarchic physicality, gravity-defying leaps and falls, the Keystone's aggressive meaningless.[1] After all, in the fiefdom of slapstick comedy, who wants subtle, rounded characters or intricately scripted storylines? Rather, as Breton saw it, the cruder the better, and not so much scenarios as dream-images, hideously bearded clowns beating the bejesus out of each other with whatever came to hand: sticks, buckets, bricks. Indeed, it's a cinematic truism that Sennett – at best a competent director, at worst as ham-fisted as they come, his *mise-en-scène* no more sophisticated than his acting – never made any truly great (or even consistently funny) comedies, but did commit to celluloid some of the most monstrous, preposterous sequences in all of cinema.[2] As even Simon Louvish admits in his generally admiring biography of Sennett, watching a whole string of Sennett productions in their entirety can be a rather dispiriting activity: better to approach them as Breton would, stripping them free from any kind of narrative motivation or historical development, disregarding titles, dates or ostensible direction, approaching them not as a sensitive *cineaste* but as a cop unsheathing his truncheon.[3] Indeed, (to be deliberately provocative) isn't the best way to approach Keystone through Robert Youngson's much maligned compilation films, *The Golden Age of Comedy* (1957) and *When Comedy Was King* (1960), or the Sennett-approved *Down Memory Lane* (1949), this greatest-hits compilation a convulsive, almost epileptic series of shocks, blows and grossly accelerated car crashes, disassociated from any kind of narrative order? Viewed from this perspective, Sennett's universe appears as a creation of perpetual disaster and unpredictability, a crazy flea-circus or Punch and Judy show blown up to hypertrophic proportions.

In a letter dated 1917, the avant-garde poet Louis Aragon dreams of his own perfect Keystone production, an absurd *mélange* of 'crazy cars,

you know the kind, collapsing bridges. And then, of course, Charlie Chaplin grinning, with staring eyes. The policeman forgotten in the trunk!' (Hammond, 1978, p. 4). In his seminal essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1914), Walter Benjamin sees the Little Tramp's antics as 'the natural achievement of what the Dadaists tried to do with performance', slapstick comedy the apotheosis of all that Dada's anti-art stood for: 'extravagances, crudities, barbarisms' (Benjamin, 1992, pp. 242, 230). The shock strategies of Dada – the calculated outrages, meaningless surprises, sudden jolts – all find their corollary in silent film, which likewise 'hits the viewer like a bullet', tactile, immediate: film is *something that happens to you* (Benjamin, 1992, p. 230). Interestingly, both Walter Kerr and Rae Beth Gordon conceive of slapstick in strikingly corporeal, even physiological terms – breathlessness, convulsions, involuntary jumps, jerks and jolts – including, of course, the bodily response of laughter.[4] For Benjamin, these films act as a kind of shock therapy, assailing the audience with a series of visual blows while robbing it of any space in which to reflect upon the images projected. Hence, slapstick is considered to be something both unwilled and contagious: in this context, one might well note that Sennett's first film as director for Biograph was *Contagious, Nervous Twitching* (1910).

In his essay on Keystone in *The Seven Lively Arts* (1924), Gilbert Seldes advances the idea that the slapstick chase represents not a low, vulgar comedy routine, but rather the purest form of cinematic art: bodies in motion, animated matter, the spatial 'shock' of fast editing and impossibly accelerated action. 'Those things which could not be done with any instrument but the camera, and could appear nowhere if not on the screen', he proclaims (Seldes, 1924, p. 15). Film, in Seldes's opinion, is an inherently kinaesthetic art form. Serious melodramas are little more than canned theatre, he avers: the chase liberates the camera, propelling (hitting, shooting, pushing, catapulting) its blurry figures through a new, quintessentially modern environment of speed, force and dynamism. Like the surrealists, Seldes advises audiences to forget the 'preposterous plot', in relation to which 'events have a little connexion [*sic*] as [. . .] a clog dance in a musical comedy'; rather, the 'meaning' of Keystone lies in its registering of an unending series of kinetic shocks: 'the immortal Keystone cops in their flivver, mowing down hundreds of telegraph poles without abating their speed, dashing through houses or losing their wheels and continuing, blown to bits and reassembled in mid-air' (Seldes, 1924, pp. 18, 20). The effect of speed upon bodies in space: isn't this what cinema is all about?

Similarly, James Agee, in 'Comedy's Greatest Era', perceives the apparent grotesquerie of Sennett's chases as in truth, 'beauties of comic motion [...] Words can hardly suggest how energetically [the figures] [...] collided and bounced apart [...] how hard and how often they fell on their backsides, or with what fantastically adroit clumsiness they got themselves fouled up in folding ladders, garden hoses, tethered animals and each other's headlong cross purposes' (Adair, 1999, p. 120). For Agee, Sennett's productions expressed a 'wild-animal innocence and glorious vitality', a rude health and physical frankness absent in the melodramatic pretensions of legitimate drama (Adair, 1999, p. 121). Walter Kerr interprets the wrestling, struggling, tumbling figures in terms of a kind of 'simian play': hairless apes (or rather extravagantly moustachioed gorillas) 'learning by rude, random and utterly amoral behaviour what the universe and his fellow creatures will tolerate' (Kerr, 1980, p. 63). What they discover is that the world belongs to the strong, the crafty and the heartless, a knowledge qualified by the essentially arbitrary and random nature of their cinematic cage: disaster can (and will) happen to anyone at any point. But Sennett's universe is 'heartless' rather than 'cruel', Kerr concludes: it occupies a space 'before law or emotion', but also crucially a space without consequences (Kerr, 1980, p. 63). No matter how many times one is shot, knocked off a cliff or set fire to, no-one is ever really hurt; just as in children's games, all the toys can be put back together again, ready for the next time.

Probably the best summary of the essential spirit of Sennett's *oeuvre* can be found in Raymond Durgnat's *The Crazy Mirror* (1969), which he defines in terms of 'the unholy trinity of American screen comedy: parody (of other films), ridicule (especially of noble virtues and lofty sentiments) and visual knockabout (which he [Sennett] lifted, by insistence and inventiveness, to the level of poetic fantasy)' (Durgnat, 1969, p. 68). Much of Sennett's comedy is about the shock of speed, its insult to man.

In Sennett movies, 'the human body is all but reduced to an apparatus for punching, kicking, ducking and dodging. It becomes a none-too-intelligent piece of protoplasm which has made a slap-happy adaptation to a civilization of crankshafts and flywheels' (Durgnat, 1969, p. 69). Violence in slapstick movies is reflexive: one either fights or runs away, both heroes and heavies (insofar as it's possible to differentiate between the two) oscillating between cowardice and belligerence. Every object is a weapon; every situation some kind of booby-trap: in a Sennett production there is no such thing as a safe place to stand.

In this sense, then, it's easy to see why the avant-garde should adore such a set-up, hailing crude knockabout comedy as a genuine manifestation of cinematic surrealism (unwittingly on the behalf of its makers, of course, but then, one cannot *consciously* set out to make an *unconscious* film), the spirit of Dada reborn in the sunny back-lots of California. This dreamlike sense of destructive absurdity – a meaningless, anarchic universe pulverizing and dismantling its hapless victims – perfectly tallies with both the noise and speed of the modern city and (especially for later European commentators) the devastating effects of the First World War. There is nothing stable about Sennett's sets: walls could collapse at any time, one exit leading to a fiery furnace, the other unleashing an inexplicable tidal wave (in *Bath Tub Perils* (1916), one unlucky hotel guest floats away in his tub down into the lobby, out into the street, and is finally swept out to sea). In essence, the distinction between inside and outside no longer seems workable: Model Ts come crashing through the door at any moment; a rube wakes up to find his bed tied to a speeding auto; an escaped gorilla is inexplicably lurking in the closet. If anything, Sennett's world appears (as suggested in Chapter 1) most like a Freudian anxiety dream: lions prowling through one's kitchen; bearded maniacs hiding in one's closet; one's house coming free from its foundations and rolling down onto the railway tracks. In this world, nothing is certain, nothing stands still. Autos are just as likely to explode as start when one turns the crankshaft. Bridges collapse, roofs fly off, cigars blow up in one's face. In such a world, what can one trust? One's expensive new coat might just as easily turn out to be a ferociously angry bear; the first step outside one's door a precipitous plunge into a deep, dark well. Nor do the laws of gravity or proportion still seem to hold sway: dozens of cops could be contained in the back of one tiny police van; streetcars could not only mount pavements but climb walls; vicious stray dogs are just as likely to lurk in the tops of trees as beneath them. Clothing, dignity, possessions – all are vulnerable. This is an asylum with no safe haven and no way out: solid ground itself is at a premium.

For Durgnat, as for Breton and the surrealists, the key to these movies is the way in which they jettison narrative, replacing logical plotting with the absurd discontinuity of the gag. There are no 'stories' or character motivation, Durgnat argues; rather the protagonists respond amoeba-like to whatever kick or pie befalls them. They don't *choose* to move on to the next scene but are simply propelled there, bodily. 'The logic of narrative and character are subordinated to a purely visual humour', Durgnat avers, the clown-like figures *acted upon,* rather

than possessing volition of their own (Durgnat, 1969, p. 69). As if in a great dollhouse picked up and shaken wildly, figures tumble willy-nilly from scene to scene, each disaster the precursor to the next one, existence a series of increasingly painful jump-cuts. The stick figures racing up and down these collapsing sets are not any more reliable. Grotesquely made-up with mask-like whiskers, beards and ghoulish make-up, characters' identities can change just as swiftly as the location (chin hair, in particular, demonstrates a disconcerting tendency to migrate). Passers-by turn out to be sheriffs, women to be enormous men in drag, respectable looking old men to be burglars or maniacs (in *Wandering Willies* (1926) a cooing woman stares into a pram only to find the bestubbled features of a weather-beaten tramp). Moreover, these figures dash past so quickly they resemble only blurs, streaks, animated suits of clothes; in such a melee, all that remains, Cheshire-cat-like, are their cartoon features: enormous coaled eyes, drooping soup-strainer whiskers, and the freakishly big and the strangely stunted. Among Sennett's stock players, normality appears in frighteningly short supply.

Figure 2.3 *The Bangville Police* (Henry Lehrman, 1913).
Source: Mack Sennett/Keystone Film Company.

Twits and their relation to the unconscious

At this point, one may well wonder if Sennett's world is so nightmarish, so unremittingly capricious, then why should such films elicit laughter at all? A Freudian reply would be that all dreams, even the most disconcerting, act as the guardians of sleep, of comforting illusion. As noted earlier, no-one is ever truly hurt in slapstick; a pistol shot to the posterior stings and nothing more (when Chaplin is shot in *The Tramp* (1915) and doesn't immediately jump up, the film breaks one of comedy's most fundamental covenants). As Ian Christie notes in *The Last Machine,* American slapstick grew out of a French comic tradition that involved a great deal of gags about amputation and dismemberment, 'treating the living body as a machine, or a toy, something which can be taken apart and reassembled at will' (Christie, 1993, p. 86). Explosions that don't maim, limbs that can be re-attached, torsos that can be rolled out flat by a steam-roller but then spring back into shape: slapstick comedy expresses the wish that violence can be treated as a game without repercussions, a motif which seemed to derive from the comic-strip tradition when Sennett was starting out in 1912, but which would come to embody a much more fundamental need in the aftermath of the First World War. We will return to the idea of man as toy in the next chapter on Chaplin, and to the idea of slapstick as a collective response to cultural shell-shock in Chapter 8, but for now we may content ourselves with the idea that slapstick comedy expresses the childish wish that pain should not hurt, a notion that exists alongside the equally infantile desire to inflict pain indiscriminately, without any fear of punishment or consequence.

Gratuitous violence is, of course, the mainstay of the Keystone world. Walter Kerr writes of:

> Louise Fazenda removing Mack Swain's hat and smoothing his last few hairs down, preparatory to hitting him on the head with a baseball bat; Mack Swain running Chester Conklin off a cliff and rescuing him by roping him around the neck and hauling him all the way back up again; Chester Conklin, active but characterless, loading balls into a cannon and blowing up everything in sight; Chaplin, without malice, lifting his left foot to kick a woman through a doorway.
>
> (Kerr, 1980, p. 63)

Indeed, many of the original roster of Keystone clowns do little else other than kick, swing or pound: Al St John, a human jumping-jack

whose 'role' in movies seems to be little more than that of a demonic imp, malevolently striking out in all directions while leaping six feet off the ground; or Ford Sterling, Keystone's first real star (alongside Mabel Normand) gurning and mugging for the camera while slapping, hair-pulling and molesting whatever poor unfortunate happens to walk on by. Even early Chaplin can be stunningly callous. In *His Favourite Past Time* (1914), for example, Chaplin uses the towel in the men's room to shine his shoes before nonchalantly passing it to the next patron to use on his face, and when the man protests, Charlie simply clobbers him and then throws him out of the door (ironically, the French title for this was *Charlot est trop gallant*!). In *The Good-for-nothing* (1914), when Chaplin flirts with a girl and she asks him to take her wheelchair-using father out for some air, the first thing Chaplin does is take him to the pier and deposit him over the edge. In *The Fatal Mallet* (1914), Chaplin thinks nothing of kicking a small boy off his bench so he can get back to romancing (or rather, bothering) Mabel. Indeed, despite the romantic pining of the Little Tramp in his later features, the early Chaplin's response to women in Keystone movies is hardly chivalrous. When Charlie spots Ford Sterling haranguing a young woman (and trying to steal her umbrella) in *Between Showers* (1914), he just points, sticks his tongue out and giggles. In *Mabel's Strange Predicament* (1914), Chaplin is cast as an active sexual pest, disreputable and aggressive, drunkenly forcing his attentions on an otherwise innocent Mabel, who ends up locked out of her hotel room in just her pyjamas. In *Laughing Gas* (1914), Chaplin's manic dentist anaesthetizes pretty women before using a pair of pliers to pull them up out of their seats to kiss them; indeed, in virtually all of his early Keystone shorts, Chaplin's incorrigible skirt-chaser pursues his victims relentlessly, demonstrating little concern as to whether his feelings are reciprocated. Admittedly, some of his liberties are perhaps more subtle: he is forever sitting on women's laps, resting his leg over theirs, absent-mindedly getting his cane caught up in their voluminous crinoline skirts. Perhaps the turning point comes in *Those Love Pangs* (1914), when, seeing that he is about to receive a fork in the backside while dancing, Charlie manoeuvres the woman he is dancing with into position to receive the blow, although, ultimately, he thinks better of it. By the time of *The Tramp,* made for Essanay rather than Keystone, Chaplin grimaces when he hands the stolen monies back to the farm girl but remembers to bat his eyelids too.

Certainly, early Keystone films express, at the very least, a rambunctious, matter-of-fact promiscuity. As a matter of principle, all husbands have wandering eyes, all wives perfectly content to flirt with roguish

passing strangers; park benches are incredibly busy pick-up joints, whose illicit activities are inevitably disrupted by chamber-pot-headed policemen, prudishly enforcing the 'no spooning' signs – when they aren't actively chasing the girls themselves, of course. Admittedly, the hanky-panky is only allowed to go so far before the erring partners are discovered and pelted with bricks, pummelled with walking sticks and so on (and the warring couples tend to end up back with their original partners by the end of the film); nevertheless, Keystone films work on the cynical assumption that human instincts are inherently inimical to monogamy. Farce displaces romance in Sennett's world, aggressive sexual pursuit taking the place of genteel wooing. Women are not exempt from the rough stuff, or in any way placed on a pedestal. Mabel receives a pie in the face from Ford Sterling in *A Muddy Romance* (1913) and later plunges into the muck of a drained-out lake; in *A Fatal Mallet,* she gets a brick in the face, tossed by one careless lover, only to immediately lob it back at Charlie. And women not as pretty as Normand (or as favoured by Sennett) tend to get even worse treatment, the classic example being *Love, Speed and Thrills* (1915), in which Minta Durfee's heroine is kidnapped by the villainous Chester Conklin on a motorbike, garrotted by the tripwire the Keystone Kops have placed across the road, trampled by Mack Swain's horse in the ensuing melee, shot in the bushel during the gunfight and finally hauled up from the bottom of a gorge by her neck (it is perhaps a sign that *Love, Speed and Thrills* is not for the faint-hearted when Chester Conklin is first spotted hunting for pet cats with a twelve-bore shotgun, and immediately shoots one out of a tree).

Slapstick comedy thus portrays both a dog-eat-dog world and a world in which anything goes. If one wants to grab a woman, one grabs her; if you desire to indiscriminately smash up somebody's car, home or hat, there's nothing to stop you – after all, the Keystone Kops, those fine upstanding agents of law and order, are also on the make and as equally likely to add to the chaos as extinguish it. In this context one might well think of Freud's ironic aside in *Civilization and its Discontents*: 'if [. . .] one may take any woman one pleases as a sexual object, if one may without hesitation kill one's rival for her love or anyone who stands in one's way, if, too, one can carry off another of the other man's belongings without asking leave – how splendid, what a string of satisfactions life would be!' (Freud, 1964, p. 19). In Freudian terms, Sennett's films represent an aggressive de-sublimation, a throwing-off of all the repressive restraints of civilized behaviour: Sennett's is the childish kingdom of do-as-you-please, the carnivalesque. In Chaplin's first short, *Making a Living* (1914),

at the site of a car crash, the first thing one witness does is photograph it; the first thing Chaplin does is thump the onlooker and steal the camera. But then, why not? Here, there are no restrictions, no prohibitions. After disposing of one drunken ne'er-do-well with a mallet in *Caught in a Cabaret* (1914), Charlie decides he may as well clobber the other waiter as well. Greed and physical appetite are every bit as strong motivations in all of this as lust or belligerence: think of Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle's down-at-heel thug in *His New Role* (1914), drinking the entire contents of the drum in the soup kitchen; or Chaplin in *The Landlady's Pet* (1914, also known as *The Star Boarder*) invited to take a place at a respectable boarding-house table, only to pile the entirety of the spread on his plate before striding off to empty the icebox. There are no table manners in Sennett's films, only appetite – a world without any adult supervision at all (despite the omnipresent Kops).

Such notions immediately tally with Freud's famous analysis of humour in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1903), which links the free association of the improvised gag to the unconscious functioning of the dream work (Freud, 1991, p. 61). Jokes, like dreams, work through processes of condensation (everything happens at speed in a small area), displacement (what are all these gorillas doing in my room?), exaggeration and nonsense, disguising unacceptably hostile or obscene wishes within the socially permissible outlet of humour. Jokes 'make possible the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way', writes Freud, the obstacle being the laws and prohibitions that allow civilization to function in the first place (Freud, 1991, p. 144). As such, jokes 'release pleasure from sources that have undergone repression': they remove inhibitions, at least in the sense of acting out an *exaggerated pantomime* of the forbidden (Freud, 1991, p. 185). Crucially, jokes are also linked to regression, to an infantile negotiation of that which is permissible and that which will bring forth sanctions. 'Thought is put back for a moment to the stage of childhood so as to once more gain possession of the childish source of pleasure', writes Freud; this includes the free play of images, associations (and in verbal gags, sounds) that don't have to make sense and thus require no mental expenditure (Freud, 1991, p. 227). 'There is little that gives children greater pleasure than when a grown-up lets himself down to their level', concludes Freud near to the end of his essay. This 'relief' (a relief from responsible behaviour) 'gives the child pure pleasure' but for adults acts as a 'form of degradation [...] a means of making things comic and a source of comic pleasure' (Freud, 1991, p. 292). Ultimately, 'these things are comic which are not proper for an adult', Freud argues,

which is to say, when adults behave as irresponsibly as toddlers, having as little control over their bodily functions, moving as clumsily and winding up as messy (Freud, 1991, p. 302). This explains the scatological nature of a great deal of comedy, its stress on bowel movements and toilet training (my favourite title comes from a 1907 Max Linder film, *Daddy's Having an Enema*), as well as the repeated motif of small helpless figures bullied by the strong and the menacing.

The comic is 'an awakening of the infantile', writes Freud, 'the lost laughter of childhood' (Freud, 1991, p. 289). Watching a clown stumble, struggle or slip (think of the too-small Charlie attempting to deliver a grand piano on his back in *His Musical Career* (1914) or virtually the entire output of Laurel and Hardy), we think, in Freud's formulation, 'he does it as I used to do it as a child' (Freud, 1991, p. 289). This both degrades the dignity of adult authority and revives a lost source of infantile pleasure: the comic is fundamentally based around 'degradation' of regression. Hence, there is an aggressively antisocial impulse behind jokes, a desire to drag those in authority down to our level: 'an attack on the great, the dignified and the mighty who are protected by internal inhibitions and external circumstances from direct disparagement' (Freud, 1991, p. 149). Jokes 'represent a rebellion against [...] authority and a liberation from its pressure', Freud writes (Freud, 1991, p. 149). In essence, 'society' becomes no more than the play of squabbling brats, its rules and restrictions arbitrary and absurd.

Sennett himself was no reader of Freud (unlike, interestingly enough, both Chaplin and Mabel Normand), but his productions seem to reflect Freud's theories. In an essay written for *Motion Picture Classic* in 1918, Sennett notes:

> There is no American who, as a boy, has not dreamed of caving in the helmet of a cop with a mighty swat that will send it around his ears. Most of us have never gotten over that feeling [...] Lacking the courage and opportunity, we like to see it done in movies.
>
> (Louvish, 2003, p. 6)

Perhaps this explains the appeal of the Keystone Kops (never actually 'stars' as such, but rather employed as a kind of fleshy prop): if authority makes us feel like children then we can take our revenge by making children of the cops too. In their first 'official' appearance in *The Bangville Police* (1913), they tumble out of their rundown police station in odd, ill-matched clothes (they possess badges but no uniforms), most of which are several sizes too large. On duty, they are unable to disentangle

themselves from the phone or to get the police wagon to start (when one hits it with a hammer the bonnet explodes). When the engine does finally fire, the Kops drive at double speed along the town sidewalks (although, to be fair, the country road seems to be inexplicably mined), before arriving, guns blazing, at the farm where burglars have been spotted, indiscriminately firing their popguns at whosever backsides come into range (bullet-wounds are always to the buttocks in Sennett's films). *The Bangville Police* is a clear parody of Griffith's *The Lonely Villa* (1911), complete with matching close-ups of Mabel Normand as the threatened innocent, breathlessly phoning for help, and a sinister hand trying to grab her. Here, however, the term 'help' is applied rather more loosely; unlike in the patrician Griffith's film, here the agents of law and order arrive long after the 'burglars' (if that's who they truly are) have absconded, both Mabel's father and the Bangville constabulary taking turns firing their guns into the wardrobe where Mabel is hiding. Moreover, while the 'race-to-the-rescue' motif in Griffith's film acts to draw together all the spatial and temporal elements of the film into one coherent whole, Sennett disrupts any such sense of narrative progression: the baddies have already gone, and the plot suddenly comes to an abrupt halt when a calf is born (!) and Mabel steps out of the chaos to cuddle it. As such, the narrative form of the film is subverted alongside the ostensible authority of the law; indeed most early Keystones just stop rather than end, often when the chaos has reached critical point or when all concerned have jumped off a pier into the drink (even Sennett's feature-length *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (1914) fails to wrap itself up any more conclusively). Rather than any kind of narrative arc, with Sennett, one has the sense of atoms in a state of great agitation, eventually leading, inexorably, to a critical explosion, whereupon the film ends, irrespective of whether the various love affairs or the matter of stolen goods is settled or not.

The anarchist's union

This combination of senseless violence and narrative deconstruction (although, given that Sennett's studio was knocking out two or three of these pictures a week, it is probably fair to credit rude necessity rather than theoretical sophistication) inevitably gives rise to a second critical truism regarding such comedies: their inherently anarchic, politically subversive nature. Amos Vogel, in his infamous *Film as a Subversive Art* (1974), celebrates Sennett's work as 'an attack upon bourgeois notions of a stable, orderly universe, in which appearance equals reality, justice

and law prevail, the meek are accommodated and the lovers safely married' (Vogel, 1974, p. 50). Instead of the sentimental norms of what we would now call 'romantic comedy', 'mothers are attacked, prams upturned, children despised, sentimental love satirized, last minute rescues and happy endings made fun of, and the sanctity of hearth and home besmirched' (Vogel, 1974, p. 52). Indeed, one might read the Keystone manifesto as a seditious subversion of all that America stands for: in Sennett's land of the free, rugged individualism is replaced by anarchic one-upmanship, with property destroyed, authority disrespected and romance mocked, revealing a nation of hooligans, criminals and conmen on the make.

Moreover, the extent of Sennett's affront to 'decent' American sensibilities must also be understood within the context of the time. Early twentieth-century American culture was still very much in thrall to the values and morality of the so-called genteel tradition, including the view that art should be ennobling, concerned with the higher aspirations of the human spirit and the cultivation of moral uplift. In such endeavours, good taste, decorum and didactic moralizing were very much to the fore; art expressed the beauty of what man might be, the ideal model for others to follow. Needless to say, the low belly-laughs of slapstick – the bodily humour, stupidity, clumsiness, the sheer unending catastrophe of Sennett's set-up – occupy the opposing pole to all of this. While the genteel tradition expressed the finer sensibilities of humankind – which is to say, the depths of the human soul, the brilliance of the human mind, the extent of humankind's achievements – slapstick comedy, if it teaches us anything, teaches us that human endeavour will always be undone by incompetence, ineptitude and base desires, as slapstick involves (in Luckács' words) 'bodies unable to perform according to the requirements of a task' (King, 2009, p. 48). Such a position need not necessarily be crueller than that of spotless idealism, of course. After all, slapstick is also extremely forgiving of man's foibles, accepting of failure and foolishness as the basic facts of life, and embracing mess, chaos and dirt. However, it is profoundly opposed to ideas of perfection and perfectibility, and the notion, held by many at the start of the twentieth century, that human behaviour is correctible, that a perfectly organized, perfectly reasonable society is possible if only everyone could just learn to behave. Its recalcitrant bodies and badly behaving limbs also go against the technocratic models advocated by scientists, engineers and systems-analysts (discussed in the previous chapter): either too fast or too slow, too lazy or too manic, too fleshy and too unwieldy, the slapstick body is always in the way. The excesses of Sennett's world

speak of waste (all those pies! all those explosions!) and inefficiency; although, at the same time, Sennett's studio was itself producing one- and two-reelers with remarkable industry and thrift, rolling out their visions of chaos from a seemingly endless production line.

Indeed, there is a striking paradox when it comes to slapstick comedy's 'revenge on an over-orderly world' (Durgnat, 1969, p. 19): for all the stress on dysfunction and disaster in its films, Sennett's studio, by necessity, maintained a tight ship. While some early Keystones are blatantly thrown together with great haste – improvised on location, such as *Fatty and Mabel at the San Diego Convention (*1915), or else opportunistically taking advantage of real events, such as the Tramp's debut in *Kid Auto Races at Venice* (1914) – others are carefully calibrated miracles of timing and engineering; indeed, they had to be or else somebody was going to get hurt.[5]

For all the *appearance* of unsupervised chaos, the chases and stunts were, in truth, carefully mapped-out and orchestrated, at their best demonstrating what David Cook describes as Sennett's 'genius for timing movement, both the frenetic physical activity which filled the frames of his films, and the breathless editing rhythms which propelled them forwards at break-neck speeds' (Cook, 1990, p. 210). As in all anarchist movements, the key to success lay in the planning. In his exhaustive histories of the Keystone studios, Kalton C. Lahue stresses how Keystone's brand of vehicular madness was, in truth, meticulously arranged: liquid soap on the roads, an altered braking system, undercranking the camera to accelerate the action, cutting every fifth frame (Lahue, 1971, p. 46).

By necessity, virtually all of the early Keystones were shot on location, often drawing in crowds of bemused onlookers. While the surrealists celebrated Sennett's kingdom as a kind of self-contained world of misrule, perhaps the most striking thing for viewers today is the sense of dreamlike absurdity in the films, rubbing up against a bracingly mundane reality: dusty roads, dilapidated shacks, fenced off factories, the rather rundown sobriety of early twentieth-century Los Angeles. To a modern onlooker, old Hollywood looks incredibly rural with its empty lots, sparse scrubland, country stores, cabbage patches and makeshift barns. Alongside the madness, early Keystones also document a frugal, proletarian US – grubby liquor stores, seedy-looking saloons (saloons that were themselves put out of business by the new Nickelodeon boom), clapboard houses and empty, flat horizons. In this sense, perhaps the 'genius' of American comedy lies in its ability to locate the absurd among the proletarian and the quotidian, a familiar

workaday environment to the audiences spending their nickel at the picture-house.

There is a class and ethnicity aspect to the idea of subverting the genteel tradition as well. Gentility is a profoundly bourgeois, middleclass virtue, the holy of holies of WASP (white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant) respectability. It is, therefore, not a great leap to see slapstick as the revenge of the working class, a robust immigrant response to prim and proper New England prudery. Best exemplified by Chaplin, slapstick comedy is traditionally seen as the humour of the underdog, cocking a snoot at pomposity, power and all the agencies of moral governance: drunken judges, matronly reformers, pious churchmen (one immediately thinks of Charlie cleaning the shit off his shoes during the pastor's homily in *The Tramp*). Slapstick's refusal to genuflect before the ideal of the 'clean' picture (writing in *Variety,* Sime Silverman lambasted such comedies as 'mussy, messy and dirty [...] never anything dirtier was placed upon the screen than Chaplin's tramp'), and Keystone's earthy corporeality and plebeian bluntness, all signal a working-class revolt against middleclass behaviour, a revolt rooted in the fact that (at least before 1912) movie-going in the US was predominantly an urban, immigrant and proletarian past-time (Krutnik, 2003, p. 63).

Strangers in a strange land

As both Robert Sklar in *Movie-Made America* (1978) and Ian Christie in *The Last Machine* (1994) have noted, film as a mass medium in the US was a product of the new social order developing in the cities: an industrialized, urbanized work-force primarily made up of recent arrivals from overseas, seeking some measure of relief from the grinding toil of factories, sweatshops and labour yards. Long hours (in 1900, factory workers could easily expect to spend up to 12 hours a day), poor working conditions and dangerous, unreliable machinery all created an enormous appetite for escape, some measure of deliverance from the soulless drudgery of day-to-day existence. At the same time, industrialization also created the previously unheard of notion of leisure time (a concept wholly alien to agrarian existence) and a huge, highly concentrated audience willing to spend their leftover wages on local, inexpensive entertainment. On this score, however, very little was available. Saloons were off-limits to women (a major part of the urban workforce); legitimate theatre was clearly too expensive and inaccessible to anyone lacking the language; and vaudeville, with its strip-shows and bump and grind dancers, wholly inappropriate for mixed, family or religiously

minded groups. Time and money were short; workers couldn't catch a cab to take in a show in the centre of town, but rather had to grab a few precious minutes squeezed in between shifts or while waiting for the children to drop off to sleep. Consequently, the Nickelodeon was a great success, situated at the heart of the neighbourhood (at the height of the boom in 1905, some parts of New York had five to a block), and showing moving pictures at the back of a store or in a theatre rigged up from a ready-made kit, seven days per week, from eight in the morning until midnight, and all for only a nickel a shot.

As well as rooted in class, the success of the moving picture industry was also a product of mass immigration and the formation of a new, profoundly ethnic, mass audience. Thirty-five million people arrived in the US between 1900 and 1924, the largest voluntary migration in history (Abraham, 1982, p. 6). Indeed, 24 million people arrived between 1880 and 1920 alone, and the 'new' immigrants were increasingly drawn from Southern, Central and Eastern Europe (and therefore predominantly Catholic, Jewish and Russian Orthodox), unlike the previous waves of Protestant workers from Scandinavia and Western Europe. By 1920, the American population had more than doubled to 105 million, and with two-thirds of the new arrivals officially registered as unskilled or semi-skilled (although the terms census-takers employed demonstrates an implicit denigration of older patterns of rural activity), the US was a more urbanized, proletarian and multi-lingual nation than the founding fathers could ever have imagined. In the US's big cities, unimaginable squalor, caused by bad sanitation, appalling housing conditions and tubercular diseases, was commonplace. Nativist self-interest, of course, played a large part in this; zoning laws and housing regulations kept the US's huddled masses firmly in their place, while unions acted to protect the interests of existing workers by imposing restrictive practices and strict quotas. Corruption, from slum landlords to sweatshop bosses to venal police officers to conmen and snake-oil salesmen waiting on the quayside, seemed part and parcel of the modern world. In this context, therefore, it's perfectly plausible to read Sennett's movies not as some absurd Dada provocation, but rather as a cock-eyed reflection of the immigrant experience, its kicks, knocks and scams. Cut off from Old World patterns of life and deeply engrained agrarian behaviour, uprooted and dispatched amid an alienating and perpetually changing environment, the daily lives of millions, taking place in an urban milieu that seemed to many to be part playground and part prison, was only one step removed from the 'surreality' of the discontinuous shocks of Sennett's films.

The immigrants' response to the dramatic change in circumstances (as well as for Sennett's punch-drunk clowns) was fight or flight: either a reaction of simmering anger, resentment and radicalization, or else the drive to 'Americanize' as fast as possible, to shed the ghetto's dirty rags. As noted in the previous chapter, fears of anarchy, Bolshevism and mass unrest ran rampant during this time, culminating in the infamous 'Palmer Raids' of 1919, in which government officials rounded up and deported 249 'undesirable' aliens (anarchists, Jews, socialists, unionists – even so-called 'hysterical women'), removing them from American soil on board the *US Buford* – the same boat Buster Keaton later used as an enormous prop in *The Navigator* (1924). Thus, any attempt to describe Sennett's pictures as 'anarchic', has to take into account the historical context of the term. The Sedition Act of 1911 allowed for the withdrawal of American citizenship, as well as the internment and expulsion of anarchist elements; one clergyman at the time called for subversives to be deported 'in ships of stone with sails of lead, with the wrath of God for a breeze and with hell as their first port' (Brownlow, 1992, p. 442). Indeed, for a time, as the ostensibly liberal President Wilson lay ill and seemingly disconnected from domestic affairs, civil rights in the US seemed virtually suspended. In January 1920, more than 4000 communists were arrested in 33 cities across the US, and handcuffed, chained and imprisoned; ironically, it was only with the inauguration of the conservative republican President Harding and his call for 'normalcy' that they were released and normal political conditions re-imposed.

Such widespread unrest, therefore, underpins the fear of the crowd discussed in Chapter 1. In official government communiqués, newly arrived immigrants were widely seen as 'unfit for democracy', ignorant as to the meaning of the term and deficient in 'moral agency, reason and economic independence' (Abraham, 1982, p. 16). Immigration officials at Ellis Island continued to treat an inability to learn English as proof of feeble-mindedness till as late as 1914. A largely xenophobic press portrayed immigrants as irredeemably dirty, drunken and mentally unbalanced, fostering crime, cholera (which entered the US in the late nineteenth century) and political corruption, on the New World's virgin shores. As previously noted, movie-going was mixed up in all this. The *Catholic Messenger* described moving pictures as 'the devil's lieutenants', while the Catholic Church and Scandinavian evangelists were united in their condemnation of film's links to idleness, rowdiness and unlawful bawdy practices (Waller, 2002, p. 35). Middleclass commentators in newspaper pieces, letters to the editor and political

speeches, throughout the Nickelodeon boom of 1904–1908, decried the filthy furnishings of the picture-houses, as well as the unruly behaviour, undisciplined clamour and lack of reserve of its patrons. Perhaps most disturbing of all to middleclass sensibilities, though, was the deplorable lack of class partition, as all seats (unlike in the theatre) were priced alike. Filth, it seemed, was everywhere. And comedy was the filthiest genre of all.

For the relief of unbearable urges

Given this toxic political and cultural environment, one might legitimately question how Keystone ever got away with it, if Sennett's films were truly as subversive as critics have claimed. The first thing to point out is that Sennett (himself an ex-foundry worker, and the son of a carpenter of Irish extraction) certainly didn't sell his pictures in any way as 'anarchic' or 'subversive'; rather, press releases stress that a Keystone picture is 'clean', 'appropriate' and 'suitable for all the family'. By no means a closet-Bolshevik, the Sennett of Gene Fowler's authorized biography, *Father Goose* (1934), appears as an all-American patriot, celebrating the accelerated reality of the New World rather than in any way seeking to undermine it. Sennett is no social reformer (unlike his mentor, Griffith), and his pictures are perhaps more accurately considered heightened representations of the trials and tribulations of a fast-changing US rather than any kind of political indictment. As Durgnat notes,

> Although Sennett's slapstick registers the shock of speed and mechanization it is by no means a protest against them. On the contrary, it accepts them as children accept them, as conditions of life, and it makes of them a source of festive disorder, a revenge which is a brief mental liberation from its oppressive aspects.
>
> (Durgnat, 1969, p. 73)

This mode of escapism – the forgetting of one's troubles for a while, 'blowing off steam' and the transformation of simmering social resentment into harmless laughter – obviously runs counter to Vogel's view of slapstick as cinematic sedition. But then the get-out clause for all comedy, even the apparently transgressive kind, is that it is *only a joke* and, therefore, not to be taken seriously. On the one hand, it is the fool who is allowed to tell the truth to the king, as in Shakespeare's plays, the jester who has the licence to hold up a mirror to reveal the bruises of the world. At the same time, however, leftist critics of mass culture stress the idea that comedy is no more than a frippery, permitted and even

welcomed by the powers that be as a useful distraction for the powerless, the genre ultimately serving a socially productive role by channelling profound discontent into momentary pleasure. 'Not all are free who mock their chains' (Freud, 1991, p. 134) claims Freud near to the start of his essay on jokes. This notion of comedy as a kind of social safety-valve for the release of tension via laughter runs through a great deal of material from this period. For Freud, comedy is to be best understood as a kind of socially sanctioned release of psychic pressure: the pressure to understand (hence the attraction of nonsense), to behave responsibly, to kowtow to those in authority. 'Reason, critical judgement, suppression – these are the forces against which [the joke] fights in succession' he notes. 'The pleasure that it produces, whether it is pleasure in play or pleasure in lifting inhibitions, can inevitably be traced back to economy in psychical expenditure' (Freud, 1991, p. 189). The mind expects that it has to behave in a socially determined manner but is relieved to discover that it is permitted (for once) to do otherwise, the gap in expected effort and resultant relief creating the 'discharge' of laughter – 'a discharge that is all the more powerful, the higher the preceding damning up' (Freud, 1991, p. 208). In this sense, comedies seem funnier the more repressive or genteel the culture from which they originate; perhaps this is the reason that the explosive laughter generated by the early Keystones seems impossible to replicate in a more liberal age. But for all this, Freud is quite clear that jokes provide a means of *managing* the psychic tensions caused by repression, and as such, they have a profoundly social, rather than a purely personal, function. Hence, Freud insists that jokes always require an audience, utilizing the said witness to both legitimize and sanction the forbidden thought. In a repressive society, communicating this proscribed urge is titillating or pleasurable enough – one doesn't have to actually act on it. Thus, jokes, like dreams, can be seen as hallucinatory satisfaction, replacing 'if only' with 'it is', albeit only within the constructed world of the gag. They are pantomimes of how we unconsciously wish to act.

Since audiences find satisfaction in the articulation of the wish rather than the implementation of the act, it is easy to see why many critics denigrate the comic as, in Durgnat's words, 'conformist [. . .] masochistic and acquiescent', with humour 'diminishing the intensity of feelings' so that the blows, injustices or crimes no longer matter (Durgnat, 1969, p. 37). Comedies are (frequently) culturally conservative, Durgnat argues, because they replace aggression with reassurance, threats with relief: for all the crazy violence, the world is a game, its roughhousing mere play. Thus, turn-of-the-century anxieties involving immigration,

work or mechanization are either softened or rendered too ridiculous to take seriously: class tensions are transformed into pie throwing. An analogy could also be made here with the European idea of carnival or saturnalia, when, for one night each year, the rich dress as beggars, the poor clothe in costumed finery, priests are mocked, kings are ridiculed, and feasting and drinking is allowed to get completely out of hand. On the following day, however, all the broken crockery is picked up, the costumes returned and the world continues exactly as before. In this sense the carnivalesque can be seen as the release of psychic pressure in the interests of the governing class, a holiday from reason rather than a revolution.[6]

Was film then employed *specifically* to manage the enormous tensions created by the new American cities and a new, industrialized work force? After all, what Siegfried Giedion has called 'The Time of Full Mechanization' – the introduction of the production line and the assembly plant, workers within the factory walls no longer artisans but rather cogs inside a vast, impersonal system, organized along operational rather than human lines – brought with it enormous new social and personal problems (Giedion, 1948, p. 41). The workers' bodies had to be disciplined for maximum efficiency just like the machinery they worked alongside, stretched for maximum productivity, *processed* just like the goods on the conveyor belt (the term 'assembly line', normally attributed to Henry Ford, was in fact first employed in 1897 in reference to Cincinnati slaughterhouses). Frederick Winslow Taylor, who started as a foreman in the Midvale Steel Works in Philadelphia before moving on to become Time and Motion specialist for Henry Ford, spoke cheerfully of 'studying the human body to discover how far it can be turned into a mechanism' (Giedion, 1948, p. 96). Harvard psychologist Hugo Münsturburg (who also wrote a number of interesting articles on cinema) advocated psychological testing in order to ensure that each worker was initially prescribed the right task and then given mental training to insure that they could then reproduce this task *ad infinitum* (Giedion, 1948, p. 100). Frank and Lillian Gilbreth fastened electric lights to workers' limbs and then recorded their movements on photographic plates called 'Cyclographs' (the originator of this process was Jules Etienne Maray, one of the fathers of the cinema); these were then compared with the luminous lines created by champion fencers, expert pitchers or trained bricklayers, all with the intention of training employees to model their bodies in a new way, to reshape the *plasticity* of human motion. Just as space and time could be measured in new visual forms, so too was the worker to be recast, and with him, the whole notion of labour.

Indeed, Taylor argues that the 'principles of scientific management' need to be carried forth from the factory into all aspects of human life – the layout of cities, the construction of buildings, the domestic kitchen (as we shall see in Chapter 4) and even personal deportment (Taylor was himself an obsessive-compulsive who methodically monitored the number of steps he took and the correct number of breaths to take while walking; significantly, he also suffered from terrible nightmares and anxieties, the return of a repressed irrationality he eternally struggled to keep in check). But it was with Ford that Taylor's principles truly altered the US. As in the Cincinnati slaughterhouses, the shop's assembly practice was to place components on elevated rails and to move them past successive groups of workmen, each carrying out a single procedure. By breaking construction down into 84 discrete operations, the Model T could, in 1915, be assembled in a third of the time of other automobiles; moreover, with no need for skilled labour (Ford's plants were aggressively non-unionized) workers, too, could be seen as interchangeable and malleable, the rate of production ratcheted up as the machinists became more and more machinelike in their actions (the idea of a purely automated plant was mooted as early as 1916 but would have to wait many decades before the technology could even approximate this).

Such mindlessly repetitive work, however, could hardly be seen as any way fulfilling, either in terms of the worker demonstrating skill or worth, or in terms of the mental or physical faculties employed. Hence, Ford's innate distrust of his work force, his ever-present fears of sedition or labour 'antagonism'. The later years of the nineteenth century and the beginnings of the twentieth were also periods of great industrial unrest: strikes, disputes, attacks on the loss of economic self-sufficiency and so-called 'wage-slavery'. Factories had shaped the workforce into a predominantly industrial form in what Stuart Ewen calls 'proletarinization', but only at a great cost (Ewen, 1976, p. 6). The heavy-handed tactics of strikebreaking, firings, intimidation and repression (of which the Palmer Raids are perhaps the most extreme manifestation) all testify to the tensions involved in forcing labour to adapt to the new mechanized order of the shop floor. This was particularly true in the case of immigrants, who, more accepting of low wages, increasingly made up the bulk of the new factory workforce. Used to very different, much slower and individualized patterns of agrarian life and behaviour, those newly arrived from the Old World experienced the shock of the new in a particularly potent form. How then to re-orientate them, to defuse class and ethnic antagonism and relieve the psychic tensions of modern life? The answer, as we saw in Chapter 1, was a new social order of consumerism, escapism and fantasy.

The panacea of modern life

Ford's second stroke of genius was elegant in its simplicity: to pay his workers more, granting them the opportunity to actually purchase the automobiles they were constructing. Mass production, with its lower costs, suddenly made a vast range of goods affordable to the so-called 'working man'; by increasing wages one could, in turn, stimulate demand and thus fuel the whole concept of mass consumerism. 'Pay them more, sell them more, prosper more is the equation' wrote Christine Frederick in *Selling Mrs Consumer* (1929) (Ewen, 1976, p. 22). Shopping had to be seen as a legitimate leisure activity, with workers spending their time and money actively fashioning a new sense of self. Simultaneously, by spreading wealth, cutting working hours and increasing consumer aspirations, class antagonism could also be replaced by a new kind of belonging. Stewart Ewen terms this 'the American project [...] to create a national, unified culture around the social bond of the consumer market' (Ewen, 1976, p. 52).

For his part, Ford offered generous welfare programs, good citizenship classes and Americanization exercises for his immigrant workforce, all with the aim of convincing workers that they were not mere faceless tools in some vast machine, but rather individuals working together for the common good of the US. Of course, there was also a strong paternalistic aspect to all this: classes were compulsory and management spies from Ford's head office checked up on workers to make sure that their domestic arrangements were also befitting of a patriotic American (no drinking, good time-keeping, no union meetings). As if at a stroke, Ford believed, class and ethnic divisions would be dispelled: immigrant workers graduating from the 'American Citizen' class at Ford's Dearborn plant attended a ceremony where they descended from the stage into a *papier-mâché* melting pot, emerging as fully fledged patriots, born-again Americans.

Early cinema-going also provides an analogy for all of this. As Miriam Hansen stresses in her study *Babel and Babylon* (1991), the original Nickelodeons were *ethnically specific* in nature, located in, for example, Polish, Italian, Russian, or Yiddish-speaking Jewish neighbourhoods. The master of ceremonies or 'film-explainer' standing at the front would introduce and elucidate the films in the local-tongue rather than English; community news (births, deaths, engagements) would be announced between reels, local 'talents' sang sentimental songs or told ethnic jokes during scheduled pauses, and the musical accompaniment and title-cards were geared towards specific cultural and linguistic needs.

As such, Hansen argues that the *communal* role of the Nickelodeon – a place where you went to meet friends, to gossip, to drop off the kids – strengthened rather than weakened ethnic bonds: in an alien and alienating world, for many, the humble flea-pit was where one most felt at home. Movies could be recast (westerns described by the film-explainer as taking place among the Tatra Mountains rather than New Mexico, bandits recast as Cossack raiders), their storylines radically transformed by a rumbustious audience actively inscribing their own meanings onto these one- or half-reel films. From the food eaten to the language spoken to the tunes played, one was in no doubt as to which ethnic group frequented which movie-house: indeed, by attracting women and children it displaced saloons and vaudeville to become the communal hub of the ghetto (Hansen, 1991, pp. 71–3).

However, as noted in Chapter 1, by 1908 the Nickelodeon boom was starting to show worrying signs of petering out, with the market glutted and many customers losing interest in the novelty of moving pictures. The answer was to move the industry upmarket, to chase the middleclass dollar and with it middleclass respectability and legitimacy. Filmmakers, studio-bosses (many of whom were Eastern European Jewish immigrants themselves) and jaded audiences were united in demanding more sophisticated, complex, expensive productions. In this sense, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which premiered in the most prestigious of theatres, accompanied by a full orchestra, lavish promotion and an astonishing two-dollar asking price, provided the model for other films to follow (on a smaller scale).

With these changes, the ethnic dimension of moving pictures altered. To satisfy middleclass tastes, the experience of film-going had to become more genteel: safe, comfortable theatres in respectable areas, nice furnishings, a well-behaved audience sitting quietly in order to follow the longer, more complicated scenarios. Middleclass patrons certainly weren't about to put up with unreliable machinery, unsanitary conditions or the whiff of vice (prostitutes, pickpockets, necking couples). No, the new purpose-built theatres had to be solid, decent places, their classical architecture modelled on civic buildings such as banks, libraries or courthouses. These were clean, ordered, de-odorized and cleansed from any kind of ethnic contamination; instead they expressed the bland uniformity of a national classicism (in truth as ethnically specific as the Nickelodeons, being rooted in white, Anglo-Saxon protestantism), their facades as spotless as a pastor's collar. It was only after *The Birth of a Nation* and the second great boom in cinema attendance that such places were to throw off their initial Puritanism and

become the lavish dream-palaces of fantasy and consumerism described in Chapter 1.

Thus, in many ways a loss of ethnic character is inscribed in the American filmic narrative. As Ian Christie and Lary May argue, films play the role of providing immigrant audiences with a view of a US, from which, in many ways, they feel excluded or alienated: movies are 'a powerful expression of an American culture which [is] often denied to them, surrounding them with images, fantasies and revelations about the New World' (May, 1980, p. 244). Film is a crucial means of instruction, adjustment and assimilation, both compensating for the drudgery of everyday life but also (as films become more lavish) offering a vision of something better, a source of new models, expectations and possibilities. Consequently, the communal function set out by Hansen is always in conflict with the impulse towards naturalization, the struggle between staying with one's own kin and moving on, the American impulse towards *becoming*. And the way one becomes an American is, by 1918 at least, consumerism.

Figure 2.4 Charlie Chaplin and Marie Dressler in *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (Mack Sennett, 1914).
Source: Mack Sennett/Keystone Film Company.

The immigrant unconscious

In locating Mack Sennett in all of this, it is tempting to read Keystone as an expression of a robust American ethnicity in some way suppressed by the evolution of film narrative, its messy *unconscious* vulgarity 'straightened-out' by the WASP necessity to behave. After all, Sennett (described by many commentators as an uncouth, uneducated boilermaker of ethnic Irish stock) derived his inspiration from the spit and sawdust vulgarity of vaudeville, reminiscing sentimentally in his memoirs of 'the round fat girls doing the bump and grind, the German-born comedians, and especially the cops and tramps with their bed slats and bladders' (Dale, 2002, p. 16). While many early American comedies were termed 'jovial dramas' and concentrated on the embarrassment caused by minor domestic mishaps, Sennett's models came from France and Italy, Pathé's Red Rooster films with Max Linder, or the basic physical humour of André Deed, Tontalini and Bloomer. Grimacing, twitching and scrapping, many of these Continental shorts are far cruder (and more scatologically fixated) than anything from Sennett. From a country bumpkin taking a crap in a phone booth in Pathé's *The Wrong Door* (1905) to the astonishing *Madame's Cravings* (1907), in which a pregnant matron devours everything in her path before finally throwing up her baby in a cabbage patch, we are a long way from the Hays code here (Burch, 1990, p. 69). 'Trick' films in which walls build themselves, or work is magically carried out by animated objects while the labourer sleeps, fulfil a working audience's most practical wishes, while 'peeping-tom' films, strikingly direct in their appeal to film's voyeuristic drives (what film theorists term *scopophilia*) fulfil other, more carnal desires, such as spying on young ladies in various states of undress.

By importing this unconscious material, and relocating it among a rapidly industrializing American landscape, Sennett inadvertently tapped into a rich seam of working-class acerbity, rancour and energy. Indeed, with slapstick's stress on violence, lust, aggression and nonsense, it is tempting to read Keystone as an expression of the US's ethnic unconsciousness, as everything that genteel, WASP, mainstream America struggles to suppress. The great modernist poet Blaise Cendras believed that 'the image lies at the primitive sources of emotion' and that at the cinema, 'the spectator is no longer immobile in his chair, [but] is ripped out of it, done violence to, participates in the action and recognizes himself on the screen among the shouting, protesting and frantically agitated crowd' (Gordon, 2001, p. 139). This brings us back to the

image of the rebellious, excitable, uncontrollable crowd: the terrifying, amorphous entity that Bernays, Palmer and Ford feared the most.

This interpretation of the unconscious drives underpinning slapstick is also in keeping with the biographical arc of Sennett's rise and fall. By the time Sennett had sold the Keystone brand to Triangle in 1917, moving his own Mack Sennett Productions to Paramount, the taste for so-called 'crazy comedy' was already on the wane. As the audience shifted from ethnic minorities in neighbourhood, down-at-heel Nickelodeons to the aspirational middleclass in respectable, all-American movie theatres, so too, many historians argue, did Sennett's crude 'comic-farces' fall out of favour. Kalton C. Lahue, for example, argues that by 1918, 'grosteque' make-up was toned down, characterization rendered more 'normal', and that even the basic plotting was increasingly comprehensible and structured (Lahue, 1971, p. 124). As early as 1915, Sennett was writing in the trade papers of his customer's increasingly 'modest' tastes, of the 'need for a more reasoned form of insanity', something more logical, ordered and sympathetic, motivated by character rather than brute force (Lahue, 1971, p. 86). Of course, for fans and purists, such as Gilbert Seldes, Sennett's new-found maturity was a development to be lamented. Writing in 1924, Seldes complained that:

> the tradition of gentility, the hope of being 'refined' has touched the grotesque comedy; its directors have heard abuse and sly remarks about custard pies so long that they have come to believe in them, and the madness which is a monstrous sanity in the movie comedy is likely to die out. The moving picture is being prettified; the manufacturer and exhibitors are growing more and more pretentious, and the riot of slapstick seems out of place in a 'presentation' which begins with the overture to *Tannhauser* and includes a baritone from the imperial opera house in Warsaw singing *Indian Love Lyrics* in front of an art curtain.
>
> (Seldes, 1924, p. 18)

In the place of slapstick's 'freedom of fancy, wildness of imagination [...] and roaring, destructive, careless energy', its full and frank gestural licence, we are left with 'low' comedy's deadliest enemies: politeness and pretentiousness, what Seldes calls 'the unecstatic' (Seldes, 1924, p. 22). The US's ethnic unconscious is thus doubly displaced: first, by the drive towards respectable assimilation and then, as the 1920s gather momentum, by mass consumerism, which, while also vitally opposed to

Victorian decorum and modesty, similarly has little place for Sennett's proletarian tastes. Unlike, say, a Cecil B. DeMille picture, slapstick comedy doesn't seek to peddle any kind of lifestyle, fashion sense or material aspiration; rather, it takes its physical pleasures in a much less diluted or mercantile form. If the key theme of a DeMille picture is the Cinderella theme, the metamorphosis of a heroine via her clothes, style and taste, Sennett's films remain stubbornly ugly sisters: grimy, grotty, redolent of the dirt under the audience's fingernails that DeMille was so committed to scrubbing out. Indeed, the insalubrious nature of Sennett's universe placed it at profound odds with the glamorous world of romance and wealth summoned up by the fashion-house studios. Alas, by the time the Great Depression signalled a partial return to the concerns and drives of the common man, Sennett was already bankrupt, and his impossible collisions mere antiquated curiosities.

Moreover, the shift from comedy shorts of one or two reels to a new feature length of over an hour also posed profound difficulties for Sennett's love of harum-scarum chaos. Keystone's madcap chases simply could not be sustained over a lengthy running time, plot-less anarchy becoming tiresome in the long run. Sennett did, of course, direct the very first feature-length comedy *Tillie's Punctured Romance,* with Charlie Chaplin and Mabel Normand in 1915 (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5), but in many ways the experience only confirmed slapstick's narrative limitations. At any rate, even the financial success of the picture did not induce Sennett to repeat the experiment. As he instinctively understood, the lunatic excesses of his universe were best appreciated in small doses: beyond this point, plot and characterization start to raise their ugly heads. After a few minutes of watching Kops strung out like a magnetic daisy chain behind their jalopy, who could take more? By their very nature, Sennett's crazy bugs could only live for a short time.

The transition to features is explored more thoroughly in Chapter 6, but it is worth noting here that this shift also marked a move towards greater conformity, narrative closure and social acceptability. As Frank Krutnik has noted, the drive towards features was economically determined by the need to secure favourable distribution and exhibition deals, but also derived from 'adverse criticism in the trade-papers, which suggested that old-style physical comedy conflicted with classical Hollywood's gentrified expectations' (Krutnik, 2003, p. 55). In order to fill a running time of 60–90 minutes, performers required sustained motivations, believable goals, and a consistent set of setbacks and successes solid enough to support a traditional narrative arc. If the film was to be a romantic comedy, then the idea of romance needed to at least

be plausible; similarly, if audiences were to follow a comedian through scene after scene then at least some degree of empathy or identification was required. In this brave new world of plotted stories, events necessitated consequences (and not just transient blows that could be quickly shrugged off) and emotions required clear, immediately comprehensible causes. As a result, clowns had to become less 'deviant', or at least their deviance assimilated within the film narrative so that they could be seen to join the ranks of the normal at movie's end (usually thanks to the love of a good woman). Getting the girl, in film comedy, acts as a badge of acceptance into the responsible adult world (settling down, having children, providing for one's family). Thus the very eccentricity of the clown must be curbed, his 'zaniness' brought back within acceptable parameters. If, as Krutnik argues, comedy as a genre is concerned with the notion of difference and convention, then one can see 'the marginal, non-normative antisocial' increasingly reined in by the aesthetic and economic demands of what has come to be known as classical Hollywood cinema (Krutnik, 2003, p. 3). In Freudian terms, one might argue that the libidinal physicality of slapstick is controlled, sublimated and channelled towards more acceptable forms. Social norms are strengthened at the end of classical comedies rather than disrupted as they are in Sennett's. Thanks to the resolution of the narrative, order is restored.

At this point, one may be tempted to conclude that Bernays and his agents of 'perception management' ultimately triumphed, the immigrant 'id' tamed, domesticated and redirected towards patriotic and consumerist aims. In this reading, the shift from the delirium of Sennett's bodily excesses to Harold Lloyd's polite comedies of embarrassment provides a cinematic corollary for wider patterns of social control. Mack's clowns are housetrained, gentrified and removed from any kind of class or ethnic context. The revolt of the irrational is over, cinematic conformity reinstated.

Shibboleths and slapstick

There are, however, a number of key problems with this apparently straightforward narrative. Film historian Eileen Bowser, for example, argues that any study of the popular press reveals that the first important backlash against 'crude', 'immigrant' humour can be traced to 1908 – precisely the year in which Keystone started operating (Paulus, 2010). Moreover, many of these xenophobic attacks on 'the polluting influence of immigrant humour' and their 'uncouth flippancy', as one

article puts it, ironically echo the very praise of the surrealists (Jenkins, 1992, p. 47). Arguably, the very notion of the immigrant unconscious as something recalcitrant and unruly, as an uninhibited scrum of bodily desires and urges, appears every bit as offensive (and simplistic) as Le Bon and Bernay's concept of the crowd, serving merely to justify their programs of social control and restraint. One might argue that the freedom and lack of restraint suggested by the word 'unconscious' is to be understood as positive rather than dangerous, an animal vitality inimical to the bloodless conformity advocated by Ford's 'Americanization' classes, but such terms remain profoundly problematic. 'Primitive', 'animal', 'spontaneous', 'uninhibited': all these descriptions, admiringly employed by Breton and the Surrealists, also suggest a demeaning level of condescension and ignorance (immigrants as children or savages). Surrealism suffers from a tendency to romanticize unconscious urges (one should remember that Freud saw the id as essentially 'evil' – or at least profoundly amoral and antisocial in its sovereign selfishness), and in this sense the corollary between ethnicity and anarchy is uncomfortably close to that of their bourgeois, conservative foes. Moreover, it also ascribes to various ethnic groups a homogeneity wholly at odds with their actual cultural diversity. Many of those flocking into the US, rather than closet liberals, rebels or subversives, held profoundly conservative, religious and patriarchal views, values rooted in Catholicism, Judaism or the Russian Orthodox Church. Indeed, one might well argue that many ethnic groups applied a much more severe, censorious and astringent moral code (particularly in regard to, say, the freedom of women) than their native-born American counterparts. In this sense, it is perhaps wiser to see this notion of the immigrant unconsciousness as *a projection* of respectable American wants and fears, akin to Toni Morrison's argument that 'blackness' is best understood as a cultural inversion of white interests, anxieties and self-definition (Morrison, 1992). One defines oneself partly by what one is not, and to this 'other' is ascribed all the characteristics one wishes to expel (or, conversely, secretly desires to embrace). Hence, the idea of 'lawless' ethnicity as expressed in yellow journalism, angry sermons and early movies would perhaps better be read as a reflection of the inadequacies, repressions and inhibitions of genteel America, with any relation to historical 'truth' completely accidental . One is most afraid of what one hides in oneself – and most willing to apply that to others.

Mark Winokur's 1995 study *American Laughter* is highly critical of any binary notion of a dominant culture opposed by a 'tardy, subordinate'

immigrant culture; indeed, he stresses that immigrants are *constitutive* of American film culture, rather than struggling against it (Winokur, 1995, p. 5). Of the thirteen founders of the 'Big Eight' studios, eleven were born outside the US, and the other two (Harry Cohn and Jesse Lasky) were the son and grandson of immigrants', Winokur notes (Winokur, 1995, p. 43). Indeed, the evolution of American film can be read in terms of ethnic repression and elison, consumerism displacing markers of 'race' and 'ethnicity' so as to manufacture a mass-cultural American 'norm' (Winokur, 1995, p. 57).

In this sense, the essential connection between early cinema and ethnicity is a paradoxical one. While a huge number of films made between 1900 and 1910 deal with immigration (not least as a consequence of the major New York studios being situated close to the Battery where new arrivals disembarked), the vast majority of these portrayals (despite the fact that working-class, non-English speakers made up the bulk of early film audiences) are hardly complimentary. In his exhaustive study of silent 'social conscience' pictures, Kevin Brownlow identifies Alice Guy's *Making of an American Citizen* (1912) as an example of 'positive' assimilation (US welcoming newcomers, transforming their fortunes) and *Adrift in a Great City* (1914) as a sympathetic portrayal of alienation, homelessness and poverty, but makes the point that these films are very much exceptions to the rule (Brownlow, 1992, p. 303). Instead, silent films are awash with sinister Opium dens and inscrutable, white-slave-dealing 'Orientals', swarthy Italian gangsters, comically backwards Orthodox Jews and rural bumpkins of all stripes and ethnic persuasions. In all of this, Sennett's Keystone pictures are certainly no exception: *Toplitsky and Company* (1913) stars Ford Sterling as a ribald Semitic stereotype (the forerunner of a whole series of 'Cohen' films), and many of his early shorts are black-face 'coon' comedies (e.g. 'Fatty' Arbuckle in boot polish and drag in *That Minstrel Man* (1914)), at best toe-curlingly embarrassing (as in *Rastus and The Game Cock* (1913)), at worst wildly offensive – *A Double Wedding* (1914), for example, builds on white fears of miscegenation by having a white man accidentally marry a black woman at the altar while his bride ends up at a riotous Negro ceremony (as an aside, the film also manages to cram in lazy Spaniards and quarrelling, violent Italians as well). One could, perhaps, offer the get-out clause that *all* individuals, irrespective of ethnicity, tend to be seen as inherently stupid, lustful and avaricious in the Keystone world, but there is still no doubt as to the level of racist stereotyping going on: well into the 1920s Jews are still crafty, superstitious blacks are easily cowed, and Italians are mainly crooks.

What, then, did immigrant audiences of the time make of all of this? Evidence suggests that they simply deflected the derogatory imagery onto others – those who came from a different region (Milanese reading the film as all about funny Neapolitans), newly arrived greenhorns who hadn't yet learned the ropes, or other ethnic groups entirely – recognizing the follies of others anywhere but in themselves. Whether African-American audiences were able to be quite so sanguine is unclear, but the ability of black performers to re-appropriate even offensive minstrel material suggests that this may well have been the case.[7] Certainly, crude racist gags were very much part of the vaudeville (and comic strip) tradition, which Sennett lifted wholesale for the screen. Interestingly, Sennett's own early screen persona was itself an ethnic cliché: the rube or bumpkin, the Irish peasant chewing on a grass-stalk in his soft hat and over-sized farmer's britches. If Sennett was prepared to parody his own background, then it's fair to assume that everything else would be fair game too.

Having said that, the commonplace assumption that Sennett was himself a kind of uneducated hooligan or roughneck isn't entirely true either. Born Michael Sinnott in Quebec in 1880, Sennett's father was a farmer who moved to Connecticut when Sennett was 17, working as a carpenter then as a restaurateur, while his wife made the real money running a reputable (and highly profitable) boarding house. Unlike many of the other figures explored in this book, Sennett's upbringing was in fact fairly respectably middleclass. While it is true that Sennett worked for a few months in the local iron foundry, his dream was to become an opera singer, and Sennett's early education, rather than crudely 'unschooled', was very much in the genteel tradition of artistic instruction, including concerts, lectures and 'dramatic events' (Louvish, 2003, p. 11). Later commentators (including Frank Capra) describe Sennett as almost wholly ignorant and 'unintellectual', but it was the failure of Sennett's singing career that propelled him onto the vaudeville stage and then into the colourfully vulgar world of New York's Bowery Theatre and neighbourhood playhouses. Interestingly, Sennett got his first break on stage via the patronage of the great Marie Dressler (who would go on to play the lead in *Tillie's Punctured Romance* many years later), this thanks to a letter of introduction provided by a local lawyer and family friend, the chairman of the Republican City Committee, Calvin Coolidge, the electric-horse riding Silent Cal of Chapter 1. Such august respectability, of course, hardly fits the Keystone legend of insurrection, but, equally, many of the other shibboleths regarding Keystone are also in need of some degree of qualification.

Figure 2.5 Publicity shot of Chester Conklin and Mack Swain (1915).
Source: Keystone Film Company.

Closely observed clowns

In qualifying other shibboleths regarding Keystone, it also becomes necessary to abandon André Breton's rules on cinema going and to start wading through all those early Keystone farce-comedies in their entirety. What if one refuses to cherry-pick the most outrageous or illogical of sequences and instead concentrates on each finished picture as a discrete whole? Well, for a start, many of the early Keystones are a lot more middleclass than one might imagine. Rob King argues that of the 75 Keystone shorts released in 1915, around 23 took place in

working-class environs (King, 2009, p. 96) – which is to say, fewer than half. Alongside those set in makeshift shacks or on dusty backstreets, a great deal are played out among the neatly appointed houses and generously laid out lawns of respectable, prosperous Los Angeles. The gap between 'genteel', polite comedy and slapstick isn't always as large as might be expected: *Wife and Auto-Trouble* (1916), which begins with a domestic dispute over who is going to get the biggest egg at breakfast, isn't all that different from, say, Sidney Drew pictures of the same period, even it does move on to involve (like many others) hen-pecked husbands lusting after curvaceous stenographers and secretaries. Such casual infelicities are, of course, a long way from most immigrants' daily concerns, but form the basic spine of endless 'park' comedies. The typical Keystone product involves a couple (usually conventionally dressed and well-to-do), a bench, a cop and a passing chancer with a wandering eye – sometimes a tramp or an exotic looking ethnic (an itinerate Turkish fakir or gypsy violinist, for example), but more often than not another fairly normal looking American (say, Edgar Kennedy or Wallace Beery). The narrative focuses on the rough and tumble as the various protagonists squabble and scrap. Grotesque make-up is not always *de rigueur,* except when it comes to hirsute cops or villains. The editing of the chases is very fast (especially the iconic *Love, Speed and Thrills*), but when played at the correct speed, most Keystones move at a regular pace – it's the 1920s Sennett productions that are accelerated like crazy-bugs.

Perhaps most shocking of all, despite the claims of absurdist-inclined critics such as Durgnat or Vogel, most of these early films *do* have a rough plot (usually involving love rivals) that more or less makes sense. True, there are an awful lot of stray lions wandering the streets of LA, and, as noted earlier, few films 'end' except with a fade-out on the quarrelling parties; nevertheless, the reason why this one is hitting another one is fairly easy to discern, even if the scale of the violence seems wholly disproportionate to the insult (generally either a gunshot wound or a glancing blow to the neck). The set-ups might not be particularly sophisticated (Fatty hasn't got a suit for the dance so he steals his rival's, who then pursues him in *Fatty's Suitless Day* (1914); the boyfriend in *Those Bitter Sweets* (1915) is shamed when his girl discovers that he's only a waiter (a set-up which, in itself, speaks volumes of the film's class assumptions) and then tries to poison her with a lethal box of candy), but while the players' behaviour is comically exaggerated, there *is* narrative causality here: one thing leads to another, and most acts of violence do indeed have a purpose.

Indeed, when looking at the over-arching comic tendencies of Sennett's career, other aspects of the chronology set out by Seldes or Lahue don't really seem to fit. True, the very early Keystones (before 1914) owe a great deal to what Tom Gunning calls 'the cinema of attractions', self-contained 'acts' intended to arouse amusement or astonishment without any real reference to a coherent narrative, what Donald Crafton terms 'a basic antagonism between elements of spectacle (the pie) and narrative (the chase)' (Jenkins, 1992, p. 5). The origins of such an aesthetic derive, in part, from the theatrical background of the performers and, in part, from frank necessity. With a very low budget, few sets, quick takes and the need to churn out as much product as possible, filming was an impromptu, informal affair by necessity, the jumps, rolls and blows often improvised on location. But even by 1913/1914, most films have a rough and ready coherence: for example, Mabel is to be rescued, fought over, flirted with ('She's mine, I saw her first' reads a title-card in *Tango Tangles* (1914)). Moreover, Keystones made before the creation of Sennett's lavish 30 acre studio in 1916, are also brought down to earth by their dependence on location shooting: real street corners, intersections, parks, lakes. For Walter Kerr, such Bazinian authenticity is part of their appeal: the prosaic world of turn-of-the-century US is right there, unfaked, and captured in all its unvarnished practicality. Sennett's early frugality (low shooting costs, single-takes, physical stunts) militates against his tendency towards exaggeration, the fantastical world of untrammelled special effects. In a sense, Keystone's very cheapness in the early days kept it earthbound.

Many of what we regard as iconic images of the Keystone style – a whole legion of Kops emerging from behind a slender telegraph-pole, Model Ts driving up walls, goggle-eyed Ben Turpin running so fast he takes off into the clouds – derive, in fact, from later Sennett productions of the 1920s, the larger budgets of which permitted greater excess. These later comedies are by far the most cartoon-like, most ridiculous, the least coherent or 'realistic' of the films that bear Sennett's name. Interestingly, it was also these later productions that the Surrealists picked out as the most daring and disturbing: thus Ado Kyrou lauds Larry Semon and Harry Langdon for the 'obscure character of their inner bents [...] impregnated by uncertainty', while Buñuel, in his memoirs entitled *The Last Breath,* reflects on his love for Ben Turpin and admits that 'Chaplin was our last favourite' (Hammond, 1976, p. 110, Louvish, 2003, p. 194).[8] In many ways, if one is in pursuit of the deliriously impossible or *merveilleux,* the much maligned shorts of the 1920s (Kerr considers them worthless; Lahue notes the *diminuendo* of Sennett's inspiration, although

by this time Sennett was almost entirely divorced from matters of production, his energies taken up with the financial side of the organization instead) unexpectedly provide much richer pickings – as we shall see in more detail at the end of this chapter.

Hence, the chronology of Sennett's apparent embourgeoiment, the moderating and breaking-in of his anarchic vitality, doesn't really seem to fit the dates. Yes, the very early Keystones are cruder and more plotless than his best-known work with Chaplin, Arbuckle, Normand *et al.*, but his later Paramount/Pathé productions (which contain most of the sequences used in later compilation films) are in many ways even less indebted to the reality principle. At least part of this is down to the enormous purpose-built studio Sennett's directors now had at their disposal. Covering 30 acres, and with an enormous water tank for aquatic adventures, kennels for bears, lions and dogs, and most impressively of all, a giant 'cyclorama' that could be rotated to provide moving backdrops for car chases, Sennett's so-called 'fun factory' was as hermetically sealed as Ford's. The feverish insanity of the late Sennett productions is at once stranger and more artificial than the mundane scuffles of the Keystones; moreover, as Ado Kyrou realises, later clowns like Langdon, Semon and Turpin were, if anything, even rarer and more exotic blooms than the bearded bruisers of Keystone's early days.

Sennett's lack of interest in coherent characterization – the very thing (alongside his salary) that led Chaplin to pack his bags in 1915 – is a constant throughout his career, and in many ways seems a more fundamental divergence from classical film-making than the slapdash approach to narrative described before. On closer inspection, many of the comics, aside from famous figures such as Normand or Chaplin, don't really possess any kind of personality at all, with the Keystone Kops being particularly interchangeable and anonymous: only the fattest, shortest, or paradoxically, the slowest, tend to stand out, and even then one tends to have to rely on hat-size or whiskers. Keystone's first male 'stars' before Chaplin, Fred Mace and Ford Sterling, play villains, police chiefs, well-to-do strollers or lunatics, but aside from Sterling's 'Dutch' beard or Mace's sheer bulk, there's no sense in which one can talk about their comic personae. Others, like Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle's nephew, Al St John, who was a trick cyclist, or 'daredevil' drivers like Barney Oldenfield, were hired for specific skills rather than comic ability; indeed one might be tempted to describe many of the Keystone clowns as primarily stuntmen rather than comedians *per se*.

Even later Sennett 'names', such as Billy Bevan or Chester Conklin, didn't really possess a coherent persona, but merely a recognizable

'look'. Bevan, squat, compact and droopy of 'tache, made nearly 100 films for Sennett between 1919 and 1929, but, funny as many of these are, there's no sense of consistency or continuity in terms of his comic *schtick*. He can be a working-class plumber in overalls, middleclass busybody in a three-piece-suit, or idle aristocrat in tails, but he never really imposes any sense of personality, his character disappearing from the screen as soon as the picture fades. Conklin, who was there from the very earliest days of Keystone and who can still be glimpsed as Chaplin's foreman in *Modern Times* (1936), is an even more extreme example of comic malleability; nicknamed 'Fishface' or 'Walrus', his enormous brush of a moustache renders him immediately identifiable, but his role in the chaos tends to change several times within a single film. In *Dizzy Heights and Daring Hearts* (1916), flying upside down in a stolen aircraft, he is both gullible idiot and manic villain; in *When Ambrose Dared the Walrus* (1915), he alternates between officiously haranguing the guests in his boarding house and attempting to burn it down.

In this tendency to switch functions, to turn his role on a pin, he was frequently partnered with Mack Swain, who also demonstrated a disarming tendency to step out of character. Huge, imposing, with a villain's droopy moustache and an ogre's baggy leer, Swain appeared to fulfil the role of the conventional heavy (a role he happily played in Chaplin's films), decked out in the Victorian villain's garb of top hat and frockcoat. An aggressive *roué*, given to much pantomime eye-rolling and moustache-tweaking, his remit in the proceedings would seem to be clear, but Swain undercuts this with an unusual sensitivity (his monster frequently dances, skips and twirls) and an expression of awful, deep-rooted melancholy, his dark, thickly painted eyes as mournful as those of a Chagall donkey. In *Ambrose's Nasty Temper* (1915) Swain first hires a bunch of thugs to flood a factory, and then (those sad eyes!) swims back in to rescue the factory owner's daughter. In *Ambrose's Lofty Perch* (1915), while his young Queen is romanced by Robin Hood (!), he watches a troupe of pretty dancing women with a great and terrible despondency, his enormous gloomy eyes huge black holes in the screen. He can be astonishingly brutal to his peers, but goes out of his way to help children (even when they turn out to be – as so often with Sennett – evil, impish brats). Ostensibly a philandering lady-killer, he can also be surprisingly devoted as a husband or tender in the wooing of his, ahem, swain, a tenderness offset by both his size and his fearsome appearance. 'Won't you try to like me?' he asks his reluctant girl in *Ambrose's Sour Grapes* (1915), his dark eyes filling up with unbearable longing; mere

minutes later he is cheerfully encouraging his love rival to kill himself (the plot revolves around a mix up concerning twin 'beauties'), thoughtfully handing him the pistol to do so. Swain's sudden swerves from grotesque heavy to soulful poet make it impossible to guess what he's going to do next and serves to muddy the distinction between villain and lead. Hence, the brilliance of his casting as the formidable, but basically good-hearted 'Big Jim' in Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* (1925), driven by starvation to stalking Charlie's fellow prospector through the snow and attempting to eat him like a chicken. The crazed glint in Swain's eye can turn to sadness at any moment, and, while never as subtle a comic creation as Chaplin's 'Little Tramp', Swain's 'Ambrose' also walks a thin line between pathos and anarchy (one might also point out that in many of the early Chaplins, Charlie alternates between victimhood and pure maliciousness, gleefully upsetting both the occupants and furnishings of a wealthy mansion in *His Favourite Past Time,* but then soliciting our sympathy when he is forcibly ejected from the party). Indeed, Swain shares what Kerr defines as Chaplin's meta-cinematic 'secret':

> For the man who can, with a flick of a finger or the blink of an eyelash, instantly transform himself into absolutely anyone is a man who must, in his heart, remain no one. To be able to play a role, to know the role as a role, is to see through it.
>
> (Kerr, 1980, p. 85)

Swain is by no means as free or malleable as Charlie (he's trapped in a giant's body, for a start) but he, too, seems to be aware that he is playing a role, imprisoned in some vast asylum not of his making. Typecast as the heavy, his enormous sad eyes gaze out at us like a mangy bear in a zoo. In the western parody *His Bitter Pill* (1916), heartbroken because his girl has left him, he wants to shoot himself only to realise, looking down at the little badge sitting on his ample midriff, that he can't because he's the sheriff. Only Keaton could achieve a more melancholic stare.

The king in his dotage

At this point let us return to our central thesis: whether one can argue that the anarchic possibilities of slapstick were tamed and ameliorated in the 1920s, Sennett himself a spent force, his energy in decline and popularity on the wane. Such a negative reading of the later part of Sennett's

career tends to interpret his 1920s shorts as fossilized, prehistoric relics, left behind in the mud after the shift to features. Bankrupt soon after the coming of sound (although he always dreamed of a comeback, he played no real role in the movie business after 1933), Sennett tends to be perceived as an irrelevance in his second decade, an aboriginal stage in comedy's slow evolution. In this context, one might note that Kalton Lahue managed to write two books about Sennett without discussing his later productions at all.

Certainly, the attempt to read Sennett as an *auteur*, or even a guiding spirit, becomes ever more strained as time goes on. Sennett started handing over the directing reins (as well as disappearing as a performer) in 1913; after 1914 he planned pictures, supervised the filming of some and rehearsed the shooting scripts of others, but his role by now was that of grand overseer or, more prosaically, factory foreman (Sennett never actually owned Keystone but was a salaried worker throughout his career). With the move of Keystone from Mutual to Triangle in 1915, Sennett was even more removed from actual shooting: studio manager John A. Waldron was at least as important in terms of the day-to-day running of the studio, although Sennett's name was still seen as key to the brand. Hence, when Sennett finally moved to Paramount, his moniker was seen as more important than the Keystone logo, which was unsentimentally left behind (thus one should bear in mind that there *are* Keystone movies in which Sennett had no input at all, although Triangle itself went bust only a year after Sennett's departure). The larger-than-life stories of Sennett spying on his workers from atop his high tower or conducting script briefings from his bath tub all date from Keystone's early days; by the 1920s he was a responsible producer and executive, still watching the rushes but increasingly tied up with fiscal responsibilities. Although he still 'green-lit' individual movies and liked to think that he was instrumental in the picking out of 'talent' (Harry Langdon, for example), the Sennett signature by now signified little more than the adoption of a specific house-style. One can make the argument of producer as *auteur* with Sennett, but there was no question that as the 1920s moved on, he was increasingly divorced from the final product. And with this, many have argued, quality control fell apart as well.

So, were the 1920s a decade of steady decline for Sennett's brand? Well, Louvish makes the point that, rather than losing money, Sennett's shorts were actually much more profitable than those made during his apparent heyday with Chaplin and co.; rather than audiences turning their back on slapstick comedy, the genre continued to germinate and

grow and attract large numbers of paying customers throughout the silent era. Admittedly, when it comes to quality, however, very few critics are willing to speak up for Sennett's late silents. Lahue, like Seldes, blames the lack of memorable movies on the taste for increasing gentrification (Lahue, 1971, p. 128). Kerr, though equally disdainful, dislikes the later shorts on essentially opposite grounds – their fakery, film flamery, an over-dependence on trick photography and special effects, falsifying Bazinian authenticity in the name of 'fantastification' (Kerr, 1980, p. 65). Rather than conforming to the norms of the well-fashioned plot, Kerr argues that later Sennett productions became increasingly ill disciplined, 'impossible' gags robbing the films of any sense of documentary integrity, the shabby realism that was always half of the slapstick equation. At the end of his career, he was content to cheat, Kerr concludes, his race to produce human cartoons cutting him off from the wellspring of lived, working experience.

Certainly, the later films do tend to overuse the repertoire of available camera tricks (stop-motion, under cranking to make the action move faster, time-lapse photography, film running backwards) and some touches have aged better than others: the superimposition of words or cries on the frame like speech-bubbles, or the painting-on of comic-strip tramlines and lightning bolts now seem tiresome, for example, while his manipulation of the human frame – figures flying, exploding, falling apart – appears as a much more successful adaptation of Méliès-style dismemberment to a twentieth-century age of force and speed. Compared with his early works, the breakneck editing, ever more extravagant stunts and sheer scale of destruction inflate the basic precepts of slapstick to increasingly ludicrous heights. As the pace of American life gathered speed, so too did Sennett's stumbling, tumbling figures.

Rob King's critique of late Sennett in his exhaustive study *The Fun Factory: The Keystone Film Company and the Emergence of Mass Culture* (2009) is primarily political rather than aesthetic. He traces three distinct phases in the Keystone story: the 'ethnic' stereotyping of the early Keystones (1912/1913); a shift to a focus on class in the Keystones made before Sennett's deal with the upmarket Triangle; and the special-effects-driven trickery of his subsequent output (King, 2009, p. 13). For King, as for Winokur, this, in effect, marks a double repression: ethnicity transformed into eccentricity, and class conflict displaced by mass cultural spectacle and invention (King, 2009, p. 180). For King, Keystone's 'working class accent' was 'softened' and 'deferred' by the commercial imperative to reach out to a wider, more demographically

disparate audience (especially after the deals with, first, Triangle and then, Paramount), with 'mechanical spectacle' and 'titillating display' (those bathing beauties!) displacing the bitter undercurrent of proletarian resentment (King, 2009, p. 13). In King's account, class tension is lost among the spinning submarines and leap-frogging jalopies, workers replaced by inventors, labour by impossible mechanical feats (King, 2009, p. 15). Just as ethnic stereotyping stresses and strains disappear from the Keystone brand in the middle of the previous decade, so do issues of labour and ownership start to fade away after the Triangle deal, although perhaps unsurprisingly given Triangle boss Harry Aitken's belief in the 'wonderful civilizing influence' of film, promoting 'better understanding between artificially created classes of people' (King, 2009, p. 155). Ultimately, though, Aitken's genteel beliefs mattered less than the creation of a new populist, non-class-based mass culture built upon consumerism, mechanization and consensus: the American answer to class war, as set out by Bernays in Chapter 1. 'Class' is elided by escapism, alienation by pleasure, economics by technological display; the more fantastical Sennett's output becomes, the greater the distance from its immigrant, plebeian roots.

And yet, for all the persuasiveness of King's account, I'm not quite so sure whether the early films are as politicized as King suggests (remembering that by King's own account, only a third appear to deal with working-class figures), nor Sennett's later nonsense quite so conformist. Certainly, viewed from a purely cinematic perspective, many of them seem to me to stand the test of time much more than the early, better known Keystones: as absurdist representations of the jazz age, surrealist essays in mass destruction, or as a purely visual exploration of the kinetic possibilities of the medium. Moreover, among the interchangeable facial hair of the later comedians, a number are much more fascinating than might at first appear: sleepy Harry Langdon (the subject of Chapter 8), blinking like an infant waking up; the boss-eyed satyr Ben Turpin; the impossibly dapper and impeccably ironic Raymond Griffith, always standing to one side of the action as if somehow spliced into the wrong film. All these have attracted less attention than the Keystone stalwarts, but, if anything, their personas are, to twenty-first-century eyes at least, even stranger, more disquieting and dreamlike. Moreover, the late flowering of Sennett Productions produced at least one 'classic': the utterly bizarre *Super-Hooper-Dyne Lizzies* (1925), ostensibly a Billy Bevan vehicle, but in truth the greatest of all of slapstick's essays on the US's obsession with the automobile, and worthy of consideration in its own right.

Figure 2.6 Andy Clyde, Billy Bevan and Ben Turpin in *Super-Hooper-Dyne Lizzies* (Del Lord, 1925).
Source: Mack Sennett. Mack Sennett Comedies/Pathé.

Slapstick and excess

The 'plot' of *Super-Hooper-Dyne Lizzies*, such as it is (generally credited to Frank Capra), appears to contemporary viewers as strikingly contemporary: eccentric inventor Burbank Watts (Andy Clyde) has come up with a patent for the US's first electric car (generated by channelling hot air from ham radios – science was never Sennett's strong point) and, inevitably, greedy gasoline bosses (personified by the slick T. Potter Doam, a neat political gag) attempt to stymie him.[9] This set-up is however merely the pretext for a series of strikingly bizarre images: 'juiced up' by Watt's process, the Model Ts in the area suddenly roar into life, tearing along dusty streets, racing across gardens and crashing through walls at will, either without the benefit of drivers or with their unfortunate owners hanging on for dear life. After this, the sequences get progressively stranger: one 'Lizzy' is first spotted herding cows, then suckling a field of calves via milk bottles attached to its hood. Electrified cars ram each other like duelling stags or merrily explode at intersections. When the power runs out, Bevan, playing the professor's helper,

is forced to push his jalopy up a steep dirt track, unknowingly hooking it onto a whole line of other autos until he is pushing a vast chain of Lizzies, slowly, agonisingly over the hill, up to the edge of a chasm, and then over the lip of the vast precipice beyond, a sisyphean image of the futility of human labour, as well as of the self-destructive nature of unfettered accumulation.

The second half of the film, in which Clyde throws a masked ball (!) to celebrate his new invention, offers yet more grotesquery, with enormous-headed demons, gorillas and skeletons partying on the factory floor, Amazonian women and rabbit-eared 'beauties' mixing with the cast (Harry Langdon is picked up and thrown across the screen by one titaness) as a jazz band and nightclub is set up in Clyne's laboratory. If one can look beyond the racist gags (the African-American character, e.g., explodes with fright when he sees the creatures), what better image is there of the 1920s, that party-to-end-all-parties, the great American bacchanalia of the Modern Age? Excess is the key to *Super-Hooper-Dyne Lizzies* as it is to so many Sennett shorts. The sheer number of crashing autos and their accelerated speed, as well as the gratuity of the stunts, all suggest Freud's economy of expenditure, the notion that we laugh at extravagance or exaggeration when this greatly exceeds our own mental expectations, the psychic excess dispelled as laughter (Freud, 1991, p. 251). For Freud, if another person's actions are excessive, then one expends more energy in trying to understand them; since there *is* no reason, the superfluous energy must be discharged as quickly as possible. 'We always laugh at an expenditure which is over-large' he writes (Freud, 1991, p. 250): hence, slapstick comedy's instinctive attraction towards the outsized, disproportionate or excessive. For King, this excess masks class issues, but one might just as well argue that hypertrophic display is integral to the age rather than functioning as some kind of mechanical fig leaf, what T.W. Adorno called 'the technological veil'.

Indeed, if the early Keystones reflect the ragtag struggles of the early years of the American Century, then one might argue that Sennett's 'decadent', fantastical late shorts act as a mirror image of what F. Scott Fitzgerald called 'the greatest orgy in history', the accelerated, jittery, materialist 1920s. The Sennett-produced films can thus be interpreted as both an anarchic reaction to an overly mechanized social order and a symptom of chaotic modernity. Indeed, most productively, perhaps, they suggest a link between the two.

After all, does the attempt to impose a rigorous, mechanically determined sense of order actually create the opposite? One might think

of Frederick Winslow Taylor and his night terrors, or the fact that the structured, rational efficiency of Ford's factories led directly to the speeding chaos of an unregulated, accelerated US. Indeed, Ford himself took refuge from the very clamorous, mechanized US he helped to initiate by recreating his birthplace, a tiny rustic hamlet near Dearborn in all its bucolic innocence: tellingly, so many other tourists wanted to visit this oasis of a pre-mechanized, pastoral way of life that an enormous parking lot had to be built to allow them to do so. Does an excess of order thus create disorder? Does endless repetition actually manufacture a paradoxical instability? These questions are also, of course, of vital importance to Bernays, Lippmann and the advocates of managed entertainment, as discussed in Chapter 1. Entertainment, escapism and consumerism were all intended as measures to curb the excesses of the crowd, to sublimate its energies and restrain its vast appetite; the excesses of the free market and the economic reality of the Wall Street crash, however, suggests that perhaps something very different might be going on.

Thus, the assumption that slapstick is in someway inherently subversive, attacking social norms in the name of a libratory anarchy, or indeed the contrary view, that comedy is essentially conservative, restraining excessive activity by redirecting its energy, seem, when viewed from the perspective of American culture, equally simplistic. Did Sennett ultimately capitulate in his tussle with a genteel, gentrified WASP culture? Certainly, there is little evidence to suggest that his later work is calmer, more structured or restrained – quite the opposite, in fact. Rather, the kinetic excesses of the jazz age appear closer to the world of slapstick than the decorum and moral restraint of the genteel tradition. The US, if anything, was remade in Sennett's image rather than that of the prudish moralists who condemned him, Victorian values steamrolled by the US's rush towards gratuitous self-gratification and pleasure. As the 1920s moved on, consumerism and the values of the marketplace displaced older and Puritan prohibitions, with film playing a key role in a new materialist economy built on desire. As a crazy-house mirror of social change, slapstick comedy captures the impact of modernity in a particularly potent fashion: whether slapstick 'manages' the stresses and energies of modernity or serves to accentuate them, is, of course, the central question posed by this book.

Henry Jenkins, in *What Made Pistachio Nuts?* (1992), argues that the whole notion of slapstick as subversion is a romantic myth. 'Why would capitalist corporations bankroll an anarchic revolt?' he asks; rather, within all classical aesthetic or cultural paradigms there has

always been room for 'disruptions, transgressions, the breaking of rules', providing 'novelty' and 'product differentiation' rather than anything else (Jenkins, 1992, p. 11). Jenkins concurs with David Bordwell's belief that classical Hollywood cinema tames and absorbs 'borrowings' from plebeian vaudeville or the artistic avant-garde, absorbing 'those elements compatible with its dominant principles' and discarding the rest (Jenkins, 1992, p. 18). We will return to this notion in Chapter 6, but on a political level, one might argue that the elision of ideological tension in the name of consensual entertainment is virtually the *raison d'être* of Hollywood itself. Peter Krämer argues that slapstick comedy embodies a number of unsettling, ideologically disruptive ideas: 'the latent aggression of people… the hidden, destructive power of objects, the fragility of the social order […] the destructive *possibility* of the everyday world' (Slocum, 2001, p. 107). However, these ideas are contained within the safety of the movie theatre and performed by professional athletes, so that our response is laughter rather than fright. Even for Sennett, there are lines of good taste which cannot be crossed; hence the advice of critic Epes Winthrop Sargent in *Moving Picture World* in 1914: 'Rough it up, but do your roughing nicely' (Jenkins, 1992, p. 51). And yet, as Stuart Hall has argued (albeit in a different context), commercialism cannot wholly contain the radical impulses of the folk tradition; even commercial texts contain 'elements of recognition and identification which continue to speak to a fundamental dissatisfaction' with the world as it is (Jenkins, 1992, p. 20). Texts, for Hall, are always 'characterised by a double movement of ideological containment and resistance', or, in the sense of Freudian anxiety dreams, expression and repression – and I would argue that this is as true of the later, technologically driven Sennett films as of his early work.

The following chapters explore how these two tendencies co-exist and interact throughout the development of American silent comedy, drawing upon shared concerns with mechanization, class and labour, as well as simultaneously satirizing and helping to fuel the US's great consumer boom.[10] Sennett's work, both good and bad, encapsulates these concerns, his essential theme, as Simon Louvish notes, 'the self-destructiveness of desires' (Louvish, 2003, p. 277). Raymond Durgnat argues that the 'zest, energy and ruthlessness' of his films mark him out as quintessentially American, their drives a *symptom* (rather than a critique) of larger social energies, but also libertarian in their expression of (as Hoover put it) the torments of desire (Durgnat, 1969, p. 73). And whether privatized in the marketplace or unleashed in the form of

intense psychic longing, desire is central to our understanding of the essential mechanisms of American silent film.

We will return to the shift from shorts to features and the idea of romantic comedy as the repression of slapstick's comic anarchy in Chapter 6, but now let us turn to Chaplin, and the idea of the mechanized body his Tramp both embodies and yet paradoxically seeks to resist.

3

Accelerated Bodies and Jumping Jacks: Automata, Mannequins and Toys in the Films of Charlie Chaplin

First, a confession: as a child, I was terrified of Charlie Chaplin. Not, I hasten to add, Charlie Chaplin the movie star (indeed, I loved his comedies from the start), but rather Charlie Chaplin the puppet: an 8 inch wooden doll mysteriously (where had he come from? whose was he?) sequestered at the back of a cupboard in our living room. Looking back, I think I must have got the toy mixed up in my mind with Hitler: that little smudge of a moustache, the too-large feet, his tendency to do a kind of sinister salute if you pulled his strings just right. And then somehow, somewhere along the way, I got it into my head that Charlie had died (he actually died in 1977) and that this was his body: lifeless, inert, a moribund, miniature cadaver, unless one was brave enough to pull his strings, in which case he would twitch and jerk spasmodically. I remember taking a perverse kind of pleasure in daring myself to pick him up and carry his little body about the room, the puppet ineffably sinister, unsettling (Freud would say, *uncanny*), completely separate from the balletic figure cavorting about in the black-and-white picture on our television screen. Perhaps as a consequence, I've always found puppets, waxworks, or any kind of doll or model to be profoundly eerie and intimidating (the correct term for all of this is *pupaphobia*), an ontological uncertainty located both in the size of the object (like a person, but too small) and in terms of its *potential* animation: will it move or won't it?

The starting point for this essay, then, is the surprising number of Chaplin comedies that feature dummies, automatons, models or doubles – mannequins which often seem to take on a life of their own. Indeed, when considering the motif of man-as-doll or models-that-come-to-life, one could draw a straight line from *Mabel's Married*

Life (1914), through Chaplin's extended treatments of the theme in *The Circus* (1928) and *Modern Times* (1936), right up to Chaplin's surprised leap when faced with a store dummy in *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947) ('I don't know where *that* came from' he exclaims). In this sense, statues, models and *fantoccini* provide Chaplin with some of his most reliable and imaginatively conducive props; moreover, the confusion between his own persona and the infinitely malleable objects around him is central to understanding Chaplin's comic universe and the specific and idiosyncratic rules by which it operates.

The first striking appearance of the motif occurs during Charlie's return home in *Mabel's Married Life,* where his inebriated man-about-town discovers that his wife has, in his absence, bought him a boxer's training dummy in an attempt to toughen him up. Mistaking the headless torso for an intruder (or even a love rival), Charlie orders it to leave, wrestles manfully with its trunk and finally ends up trying to negotiate with it, all the time the effigy bobbing to-and-fro, louring over the little fellow and refusing to back down. Charlie tries reasoning with it, threatening it, beseeching it to leave him alone, but all to no avail: the figure just won't budge. Moreover, as Walter Kerr notes, all of its faceless responses seem, thanks to the subtlety of Chaplin's reactions, strangely apposite, so that we too, like Charlie, come to believe that the dummy is alive (Kerr, 1980, p. 78). In essence, it is Charlie's animation which brings the stuffed figure to life: he seems to impart vitality to the golem by a kind of comic osmosis, just as his undressing of the mannequin in *A Woman* (1915) is rendered salacious by the lecherous twitching of his 'tache. Of course, given that this is an early Keystone movie, the pantomime in *Mabel's Married Life* soon dissolves into crude slapstick as Mabel and Charlie take turns being propelled by the dummy out of the room. But even here their rough-housing takes on a striking other dimension: flung from side to side, man, woman and dummy seem indistinguishable, rag figures, mere puppets. It is as if the performers have become mere props, but conversely, that the props also appear energetically alive.

Indeed, one doesn't have to search too hard to find multiple examples of Charlie disguising himself as a statue mid-flight, or donning a shade and standing stock-still as a standard lamp (*The Adventurer* (1918), for example). A more subtle example of this theme occurs in *Work* (1915), where Chaplin's work-shy paper hanger becomes strangely hypnotized by a small plaster figurine placed out in the room that Charlie and his boss are ostensibly engaged in decorating.[1] The plot does give some motivation as to why Charlie can't take his eyes off the statuette (mainly

the fact that he's stridently trying to avoid starting work). Nevertheless, the film, otherwise maniacally busy in its comedy business, slows down to a Langdon-esque crawl whenever the figurine comes into the shot. Charlie craftily ogles it from afar, sidles coquettishly up to it, flutters endlessly around it, before finally giving in, dressing it with a lampshade and transforming it into a hula dancer; it is as if somehow the movie can't get the figurine out of its head. Indeed, even after Charlie's reluctant dogsbody has been forced back to work, he continues to send beseeching glances in the figure's direction, an *idée fixe* completely at odds with the rest of the slapstick.

The second half of the film inevitably revolves around the buckets of paste being lugged to-and-fro until eventually just about everybody (including, for once, the saintly Edna Purviance) gets covered in the gloop. But even here something else seems to be going on above and beyond this most venerable of music-hall routines. The foreman, in particular, is reduced to a white, featureless shape, strikingly akin to the faceless figurine, as the paste transforms set, characters and props into one amorphous mass (or mess). Under the gunk, people become things, as animate (or in the case of Charlie's boss, inanimate) as the objects around them. Where, then, does the *mise-en-scène* end and the performers begin? Or rather, in the material world of early slapstick, is there really any difference?

The capricious nature of objects

Time and time again in Chaplin's films, alcohol magically brings brute matter to life, as furniture moves, doors capriciously shift and even one's vestments assume a malignant life of their own. In *One AM* (1916), the supposedly inanimate objects of Charlie's apartment all turn on him: the coat rack grabs him, his tiger skin tries to bite his ankle and the revolving table knocks Chaplin's drunk to the floor. Even after navigating his way past the dangerous swings of his clock's enormous pendulum (reminiscent of the swaying blade in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum*), Charlie still can find no rest; indeed, nightmarishly, his bed is the most terrifying adversary of all, violently springing in and out of the wall at random intervals, its trap-like frame playing with Charlie like a cat with a mouse. The disconcerting effect of all of this is not dissimilar to that produced by early stop-motion or 'trick' films, such as Blackton's *The Haunted Hotel* (1906), where furniture walks, carpets creep, and cups and saucers move of their own accord. In both examples, household objects seem possessed by mischievous imps and spirits, the inanimate world displaying a surprising vitality and wilfulness of its own.

In both these early examples, Charlie appears as victim, a mere dupe of his environment. As his Tramp persona develops, however, so too does his trickster's ability to mould and animate the objects around him, a virtuosity which came to replace his earlier powerlessness. In his hands, all objects become toys, playthings, or puppets, capable of being transmuted from their original, utilitarian usefulness to props, weapons or trinkets. The classic example of this is, of course, the endlessly analysed sequence from *The Pawnshop* (1916) in which a broken clock is transformed into a sickly patient (tested with a stethoscope), a can of tuna, a giant mouth and, finally, great coils of string, which magically spring to life to life like earthworms.[2] Things are ineffably mutable in Chaplin's world: a loaf of bread can become a concertina (in *A Jitney Elopement* (1915)), an old boot a roast chicken (*The Gold Rush* (1926)), a shirt a tablecloth with its sleeves doubling as napkins (*Sunnyside* (1919)). As André Bazin has noted, although the Tramp is all fingers and thumbs when it comes to using tools in their correct manner (or rather 'the things themselves refuse to be used'), he also possesses the instinctive ability to alter or manipulate his environment at will (Schickel, 2006, p. 87). 'Things which refuse to serve him the way they serve us are in fact used by him to much better purpose', writes Bazin, 'because he puts them to multifarious uses according to his need at the moment' (Schickel, 2006, p. 87). Here, one might think of his use of a gaslight as a kind of anaesthetist's mask to subdue Eric Campbell's bully in *Easy Street* (1917) or his transformation of a sword to a pool cue, or dagger to a toothpick in his *Burlesque on Carmen* (1916). 'Things are only willing to be of use to him in ways that are purely marginal to the ones assigned by society', concludes Bazin, evidence of a kind of poetic pragmatism, tools turned into wishes (Schickel, 2006, p. 87). For Mark Winokur, this transformative ability is linked to the immigrant's need to transform and adapt to an alien environment, the desire to influence and control the incomprehensible (Winokur, 1995, p. 75). Indeed, 'the tramp perceives mundane objects in exotic ways, either because he does not know how to use them, or because he understands them better than anybody else', the greenhorn and the worker both essentially immigrant categories (Winokur, 1995, p. 93). Moreover, this 'reflexive improvisation' is also capable of exchanging ontological categories: things can come to life, or Charlie can become a thing (Schickel, 2006, p. 89). Think of all those early scenes in which Charlie rebukes his cane for pulling up women's skirts, before putting his recalcitrant stick to bed like a naughty child (as in *A Night Out* (1916)). Similarly, consider Charlie's own ability to metamorphosize, whether into a strikingly lifelike tree (in *Shoulder Arms* (1918) we can't spot the

little fellow in the forest until he starts to brain the German soldiers), a classical statue or, as in *The Circus,* a glockenspiel automaton. In this sense, perhaps the most iconic image of Chaplin is the famed 'dance of the rolls' from *The Gold Rush*, in which, in one fluid movement, bread rolls are transformed into shoes, cutlery into limbs and Charlie's own oversized head into a kind of living puppet or *cabezundo*.[3] With reality remoulded by his imagination, where the clown ends and the world begins becomes uncertain; even Chaplin's body is transformed into a kind of *maquette* or preliminary sketch, seemingly capable of indefinite extension or contraction. In one of the funniest gags from *A Dog's Life* (1919), Charlie, hidden behind a curtain, clubs one of the hardened criminals with a mallet and then proceeds to manipulate his unconscious limbs as if the fellow is no more than a glove puppet, his fluttery hand-gestures and coquettish responses comically inappropriate even though the illusion is perfectly timed. This is one of the fundamental anomalies of Chaplin's world: the border between people and objects, the Tramp and the world around him, is mysteriously erased.

Figure 3.1 Chester Conklin, Emma Clinton, Charlie Chaplin and Ford Sterling in *Between Showers* (Henry Lehrman, 1914).
Source: Mack Sennett/Keystone Film Company.

Automatism and the involuntary

In his 1911 study, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic,* Henri Bergson argues that we laugh whenever something non-human assumes human characteristics – a dog which seems to smile, a crumpled hat that resembles a face, a shape in the rocks which forms a rude shape – or, and more famously, when a human being takes on the features of something non-human (Bergson, 1999, p. 9). This is also the case when a person acts like a machine: 'the attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine', Bergson argues – rigid, automatic, out of control (Bergson, 1999, p. 32). The first example Bergson gives us, and one with obvious connections to silent film, is the notion of looking through a window at people dancing but being unable to hear the music. Why, an onlooker may ask, are they moving all at the same time, in such an odd rhythmical way? Their movements seem involuntary, somnambulistic; it is as if they are in a trance, their gesticulations absurd. The second example Bergson offers is that of a runner running into a tree; the accident is funny, Bergson argues, not because of *schadenfreude* but because of the action's inevitability, as despite his best efforts, the runner simply cannot bring his body to a stop. We know what's going to happen, he knows what's going to happen, but he still can't get his legs to halt in time; rather, they seem to be beyond his control. General clumsiness (or, indeed drunkenness, as demonstrated in endless Chaplin movies) is funny for the same reason, Bergson argues, as the clumsy person's limbs refuse to obey the individual's commands – food spills, chairs collapse, feet stumble (Bergson, 1999, p. 14). At these moments, the individual appears to be a 'jointed puppet': he seems to be as rigid as a machine and yet still looks like a human being (Bergson, 1999, p. 32). What is funny is the *involuntary* nature of his actions: in short, automatism. 'The more exactly these two images, that of a person and that of a machine, fit into each other, the more striking is the comic effect [...] the originality of a comic artist is thus expressed in the special kind of life he imparts to a mere puppet', Bergson concludes (Bergson, 1999, p. 33).

In Chaplin's *oeuvre,* the classic example of such a set-up is to be found in *Easy Street,* in which Charlie's scrawny cop, pursued by Eric Campbell's vengeful thug, races round and round the latter's tenement apartment. Caught up in a kind of involuntary flight path he simply cannot get out of, Charlie becomes trapped in an unwilled, reflexive rhythm which leads him closer and closer to his enemy rather than allowing him to get away. While all Charlie has to do is leave by

the door, his cyclical movements trap him like some kind of perpetual motion device, leading (of course) to the inevitable consequences. As André Bazin notes, 'mechanization of movement is in a sense Charlie's original sin, the endless temptation' (Schickel, 2006, p. 91). Although the Tramp reacts intuitively to whatever peril he finds himself in, he seemingly cannot see beyond the present moment; hence the compulsion to repeat his actions in a kind of mechanization of movement which always ends badly for the little fellow. In this context, one might also think of the endless scenes of drunkenness and stumbling inebriation in Chaplin's films: his dipsomaniac millionaire spinning round and round in the revolving door in *The Cure* (1916), or the well-lubricated ne'r-do-wells of *The Rounders* (1914) having to ascend the stairs backwards and on their behinds, as normal locomotion proves temporarily unavailable. Intoxication also causes the little fellow to repeat social mannerisms and tics again and again, no matter how inappropriate the circumstances: in *A Night in the Show* (1915), he mechanically apologises as he steps on everyone's toes in the audience, and then proceeds to do it again, automatically raising his hat each time he crushes another set of feet.

But why should such mechanization be funny? Here Bergson turns to his idea of universal dynamism: life, nature, being, whatever we wish to call it, is, by its very agency, constantly changing, he argues. Being is dynamic, mutable, fast-moving; hence, we laugh whenever something that we know to be living fails to embody these characteristics – in other words, when it is repetitive, rigid or mechanical. Why? Because it seems an awkward counterfeit of the real, a poor disguise or simulation of life, causing us to laugh at its artificiality and falseness. Comedy, for Bergson, arises when we encounter 'something mechanical encrusted on the living'; we laugh at the crudeness of the masquerade, its fake 'tampering with life' (Bergson, 1999, pp. 39, 41). In short, we laugh when people resemble puppets, creatures not in control of their destinies, but rather having their strings pulled for them elsewhere. This involuntary movement inspires ridicule and mockery; the individual is no longer a higher being with a soul, but just a jumping jack or marionette, Mr Punch standing up only to get knocked down again.[4]

All of this, of course, has an obvious bearing on the Keystone movies discussed in Chapter 2, whose figures likewise appear electrified, mechanized, or in some measure over-wound. Simon Louvish points out that one of Chaplin's early stage routines was a parody of Doctor Wolff Bodie, who 'cured' the infirm by strapping them to electric chairs (Louvish, 2003, p. 10). Rae Beth Gordon has intriguingly compared early film

comedy to pathologies of the nervous system, a series of fits, hysterics and seizures, slapstick a kind of contagious nervous twitch (Gordon, 2001). For Simon Louvish, The Keystone Kops appear to be 'marionettes of some malign force of anarchy', hyper-kinetic jack-in-boxes, able to plummet down ravines, be shot in the rear or blown up by dynamite, only to emerge triumphantly unscathed (Louvish, 2003, p. 73). What are the Keystone clowns after all? They are wind-up toys, fleshy robots, destructive automata engaged in kicking, punching, jumping. The human figure as puppet, toy or doll: when dealing with slapstick comedy, this simile occurs over and over again.

Figure 3.2 Charlie Chaplin and Mabel Normand in *Mabel's Strange Predicament* (Henry Lehrman, 1914).
Source: Mack Sennett/Keystone Film Company.

I am everywhere today

Of course, Chaplin *was* also a doll – the best known and best selling plaything of his day. At the height of the so-called Chaplinitis boom in 1915, the little fellow seemed to be everywhere: pins, hats, socks, playing cards, Christmas decorations, squirt rings. Fake Charlie Chaplin coins

were released with an elastic cord passed through the middle, allowing the coin to be snapped back, *Top Cat* style; even more subversively, the coins were found to be exactly the same weight as a nickel and therefore could be used in vending machines and telephone slots (Louvish, 2003, p. 99). 'Charlie Chaplin's Comic Capers' was the top-rated syndicated comic strip; a year later an animated version of his antics appeared on screen. As in some kind of hall of mirrors (another frequently used motif in Chaplin's films), the Tramp's image was infinitely reproduced, duplicated and disseminated across the globe, a multiplying army of tramps. The appearance of his cardboard cut-out outside movie theatres, complete with the legend 'I Am Here To-day', figuratively announced the arrival of his latest adventure. Writing in 1924, Gilbert Seldes vividly recalls how the materialization of this 'grotesque effigy, propped up by the ticket-booth', with 'the splay feet, the moustache, the derby hat, the rotten walking-stick', formed his first introduction to the Tramp, an effigy he then saw unforgettably come to life on the movie screen (Schickel, 2006, p. 103).

Unsurprisingly, given the excitement generated by the cardboard Tramp's arrival, the best-selling fancy dress outfit of the period was the Tramp's dugs, with invitations often requesting revellers *not* to come as Chaplin so as to avoid confusion.[5] Indeed, for a time it was as if Chaplin *was* everywhere today. Newspapers reported that in one mysterious occurrence in 1918, the name 'Charlie Chaplin' was paged simultaneously in 800 hotels across America. A gang of desperados dressed as Chaplin robbed a saloon in Chicago in 1916; one witness noted that one of the gang executed a perfect one-foot shuffle during their getaway (Paulus, 2010, p. 240). Newspaper reports created other Chaplins: his real name was Otto Berger, Patrick O' Flaherty, Nicolai Lapidovitch; he had spent time in an asylum, was a dope fiend, a bigamist; he had died (Louvish, 2003, p. 99). During the war, Tramp cut-outs were pilfered from outside British picture-houses and carried off to the front. Kitsch, diminutive Tramp figurines (as many commentators have noted, at 5 feet and 4 inches Chaplin was himself surprisingly dainty with exquisitely small feet and hands) ironically 'adorned' (if that's the right word) many a respectable middleclass home. As one enamoured female admirer told Max Eastman, 'He's so exquisite you feel like wrapping him up carefully and taking him home and putting him on the mantelpiece' (Schickel, 2006, p. 216).

At the same time, look-alikes and imitators also multiplied like rabbits, including professional onscreen copycats (Billie Ritchie, who made dozens of Chaplin rip-offs during this period, was the most blatant,

although a young Harold Lloyd was also guilty).[6] Among the more eccentric Chaplin acts were the male-impersonator Minerva Courtney (only *Miss Minerva Courtney in Her Impersonation of Charlie Chaplin* (1915) still exists) and the Mexican Charles Amador, who changed his name to Charlie Aplin: Chaplin was in fact awarded legal rights to his character only in 1925. In July 1915, *The New York World* reported that over 30 theatres were sponsoring Charlie Chaplin amateur nights, and when Luna Park played host to the first National Charlie Chaplin Look-alike Competition the same year, the park was flooded by hundreds of bowler-hatted tramps and vagabonds, a teenaged Bob Hope among them.

This Magritte-like reproduction of Chaplin's Tramp, moustache, hat and cane, replicated *ad infinitum*, inescapably suggests Walter Benjamin's 1914 essay on 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', albeit with very different implications. For Benjamin, the creation of copies serves only to rob the original of its sense of 'aura' or 'presence', a commodification that strips away any notion of value beyond that of commercial exhibition (Benjamin, 1992, p. 218). However, the enormous and hysterical crowds that gathered to greet the 'real' Chaplin wherever he travelled, and the unmistakably uncanny effect created by this dreamlike doubling (the uncanny belonging to the category of the poetic, the marvellous and the supernatural that Benjamin claimed film had annulled) suggest that something else, something perhaps far less rational than simple exchange-value, was going on here ('There are grave doubts as to whether I am Charlie Chaplin or not' he informed reporters in Europe (Trotter, 2007, p. 193)). Mirrored, copied, reproduced, the Tramp's image now circulated across the globe – 'the Zulus know Chaplin better than Arkansas know Garbo', according to Will Rogers – in an unprecedented proliferation. As Michael North notes, 'Charlie had succeeded more completely than any other screen actor in turning himself into a purely visual sign' (Trotter, 2007, p. 193). But what effect did this duplication have? For Jennifer Bean, Chaplin's art is 'the art of imitation, the mimicking of an *always absent* original thing or self' (Paulus, 2010, p. 238), reproduction eliding the original referent (Chaplin himself? The bodily? The human?). Bean characterizes Chaplin in terms of reproduction and dissemination, categories normally reserved for machines (Paulus, 2010, p. 247). For publicity purposes, Chaplin was frequently photographed next to all these copies and duplicates, examining the latest line of merchandised dolls, gamely aping the puppet's pose for the camera. But why was it the Tramp puppet in particular that seemed to capture something mysterious about his

persona? And in those publicity snaps, why does Chaplin seem to be eying it up it so suspiciously?

Waxworks and the uncanny

In his essay on toys, Roland Barthes describes dolls as reduced copies of the human, a homunculus or goblin, or like a shrunken head 'in which one recognises, shrunken to the size of an apple, the wrinkles and hair of an adult' (Clarke, 2003, p. 197). Barthes means this in a political sense (toys are sinister because they condition the child for bourgeois life), but perhaps there is another meaning too. For Freud (drawing heavily on the work of E. Jentsch), puppets more properly belong 'to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread' (Freud, 2003, p. 123). Why? Because, in Jentsch's words, they inspire 'doubt as to whether an apparently animate object really is alive, or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not perhaps be animate' (Freud, 2003, p. 135). Particularly strong impressions are thus created by waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls (those glass eyes!), stuffed animals (played with by Charlie in *Behind the Screen* (1916) but which pounce on him hungrily in *One AM*), and automata; of course, the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century were full of automated figures, from card-playing waxwork Turks to mechanical writing hands to a robot Chinaman who could be made to climb a 12-foot rope.

In this context, it is perhaps interesting to note just how many of these machines are coded as 'oriental' or 'exotic' to stress their characteristic of otherness. Starting off in travelling fairs and circus sideshows, by the start of the twentieth century, automata and mechanized toys had wound up in the midway amusements sections of the many scientific fairs and expositions held to celebrate Western ideals of progress. There, they rubbed shoulders with the waxwork natives, savages and primitives arranged along a racist timeline to demonstrate spurious imperialist notions of civilization and improvement, cartoon monsters from other lands or clockwork gargoyles. Indeed, early waxwork Indians and 'native cannibals' owed much to the grotesque images found inside any sensation-seeking house of horrors, 'demonic' figures being antithetical to decent white society (Rydell, 1984, p. 123). Over time (although it is open to question whether this was progress or not) these waxworks were replaced by actual 'natives', specially invited Polynesian islanders, Filipinos and Native Americans who were likewise installed in fake huts, villages and encampments (this shift, of course, brought with it its own problems: in 1904 President Taft put forward

an urgent bill to put pants on the Ingot villagers at the St Louis Exposition so as to protect onlookers from the sight of their skimpy trunks). How, one wonders, did audiences adjust to the shift from sculpted representations to actual living specimens? Both figures were presented to their audience as specimens or amusements, playing on unconscious fears of dark-skinned savagery while providing reassuring 'proof' of the inevitable evolution of white, Western man. Even when presented with living, breathing human beings, the tendency must have been to revert to the same responses evoked by the earlier waxwork dioramas: fear, fascination and a sense of the uncanny.[7]

After all, as any visitor to any waxwork museum, dungeon or display can tell you, the *frisson* of fear generated is down to the aura of striking verisimilitude created by the life-size figures and the static nature of their being: they appear to be alive but are instead frozen, inert, at rest. In the back of one's mind, however, lies the sense that these effigies *might* move, and it is precisely this doubt (both a dread and a wish) that creates such a powerfully uncertain effect.[8] As Hillel Schwartz writes, 'the facsimile appears unreasonable precisely because it undermines fundamental epistemological and subjective precepts, an uneasiness exacerbated by the reproductive powers of technology that challenge our ability to distinguish between the real and the copy, the authentic and the inauthentic, the natural and the mechanical' (Paulus, 2010, p. 246).

Even 'educational' displays (as opposed to purely fantastical spectacles, such as Fredrick W. Thompson's 'Trip to the Moon' with its spherical moon-folk, or the even more awful 'Mysteries of The Darkness and Dawn Underworld' just down the block) carried with them a whiff of the preternatural, the deathly. One of the highlights of the 1876 Philadelphia Exposition was a 9-foot tall mechanical model of George Washington's tomb, where, on the hour, every hour, the mechanized model of Washington would rise from the dead, saluted by the toy soldiers keeping guard (Rydell, 1986, p. 35). Some 25 years later, this macabre spectacle would return to haunt the American imagination when President McKinley was shot dead in the Temple of Music at the 1901 Buffalo Scientific Fair. Cameras were there to record his arrival, and then, unknowingly, to document the anguish on the faces of onlookers as news slowly leaked outside. Rushed to movie theatres (and enormous crowds), the footage provided the first American example of 'film-as-news' as well as eerie sight of a silent, black-and-white, but still recognizably alive McKinley greeting the crowds before entering the Temple and succumbing to his fate, McKinley *re-animated*

by the mechanical processes of film, made to move on screen just like Washington's jerkily robotic corpse. (As an eerie footnote, a life-size model of McKinley appeared in the Temple of Music days later, propped up at the very spot where he was shot: the authorities professed themselves baffled as from whence it came.)

Thus, film too plays a part in the animation of the un-living, a taboo emphasized by the short-lived fad for 'x-ray' films (sold under such ghoulish titles as *The Skeleton Within* (1896)) and, more disturbingly, footage of epileptic patients or inmates of asylums receiving electric-shock treatment. These too, Jentsch connects to the uncanny because they 'arise in the spectator vague notions of automated – mechanical – processes that may lie hidden behind the familiar image of a living person', human marionettes with their strings pulled taut (Freud, 2003, p. 135). In short, the spectacle of animated beings responding to invisible signals transmitted from elsewhere inspires laughter in Bergson but evokes only fear in Jentsch. Fascinatingly, while Bergson's study of comedy focuses on the number of disguises, doubles and mistaken identities to be found in French farces (characters pretending to be statues or hiding in wardrobes, just as in early Chaplin shorts), Jentsch deals with the same situations only in stories of the supernatural. Such stories, as Jentsch emphasizes, are full of masks, mysterious doubles, strangely familiar-looking dolls.[9] 'One of the surest devices for producing slightly uncanny effects through story-telling, is to leave the reader wondering whether a particular figure is a real person or an automaton', Jentsch notes (Freud, 2003, p. 135). And while the classic example of this is E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman*, there are, as Daniel Canty emphasizes in his essay on 'American Automata', actually many more American than European examples of this motif in nineteenth-century fiction: from Edgar Allan Poe's *Maelzel's Chess Player* to the automated bell-ringer of Herman Melville's Bannadonna's slave and the robotic friar's head of William Douglas O'Connor, Walt Whitman's friend and supporter.[10] As Canty notes, the proliferation of modern-day golems and animated statues is very much in keeping with other cultural responses to the new patterns of mechanization in American industry around this period, revolving around a central confusion between the human and the mechanical. Although in most (though by no means all) of these stories, the robot turns out to be a fake, a human in disguise, the underlying anxiety remains the suspicion that the organic and mechanical are now virtually indistinguishable, a fear and fascination that Freud traces back to the clockwork toys and stuffed dolls of the nursery.

The uncanny and the nursery

Following on from Jentsch, Freud argues that the notion that such playthings might really be alive takes us back to childhood and our infantile uncertainty regarding the animate and the inanimate. Unlike Jentsch, however, Freud doesn't believe that such incertitude need necessarily be fearful; rather, children often *want* their toys to come to life, and wish it so (Freud, 2003, p. 135). We are thus back to that stage of infantile development which marks no distinction between desire and fact, the wish and the reality. Moreover, we have also returned to the stage in which the child is unsure where the self ends and the world begins, a period when the boundaries of the child's body seem somewhat hazy and ill defined. After all, Freud argues, when babies are born they lack all but a rudimentary sense of the self. Rather, it is as if, remembering the blissful idyll of the womb, they are the whole world and everything within it, unable to differentiate between their own limbs and other material things around them. Hence, the profound psychic shock registered when they feel cold or hungry and existence fails to provide sustenance, or when their soft, tender skin first comes into contact with something hard or sharp or pointed. Suddenly they are no longer emperors of the world, but rather just one object among many (and a rather small and vulnerable one at that), not the ocean but a mere pebble on the beach. Toys, Freud writes, serve an important role in bridging this transition. Most children have, at one point or another, a particularly intense identification with their favourite doll or teddy or similar figure, seeing the toy as either an extension of themselves (hence the importance of not losing it!) or an annex of the mother's body (just think of comfort blankets or pacifiers), or in some way endowing it with magical or transformative powers that in turn provide some measure of consolation for their own lost dreams of omnipotence.

Toys thus recall a period 'when the ego had not yet clearly set itself off against the world outside and from others', occupying an intermediate space between the 'I' and the 'other' (Freud, 2003, p. 143). As such, they fulfil a vital function as part of the 'mirror stage', when, partly as a result of visual data (including the act of staring at one's reflection) and partly as a result of trial and error, the baby begins to gain a sense of his or her own dimensions, and hence the reality of existing as a separate, discreet human being. Very young children tend to see their parents or carers as extensions of themselves (hence the impulse to smile when the mother smiles, her face providing the first mirror); in time, however, they become all too aware of their own limitations, unable to either feed

or clean themselves, and lacking the mobility and strength of their adult guardians. As a result, the earlier dream of possessing magical powers and properties is projected onto others, most especially the ego-ideal of parents, heroes and imaginary friends – including toys. Indeed, because no individual will ever willingly give up a lost source of pleasure, identification with these fabled figures permits the individual to continue to indulge in fantasies of unlimited ability, an identification that is, of course, central to the Hollywood star-system and, by extension, the whole celebrity industry of today.

In the psychoanalytic model, uncertainty about the boundaries of our bodies is manifested in our fantasy-lives via the uncanny motif of doubles, mirror images and animate *things,* things that are endowed with mysterious or unearthly characteristics. In this worldview, everything, whether sentient or not, seems alive, a mirror reflecting back the desires and fears of the onlooker, whether these be fantasies of unlimited power or the fear of being taken apart like a doll. For Freud, the uncanny is proof of the remnants of animistic mental activity,

> a view characterized by the idea that the world was peopled with powerful spirits, by the narcissistic overrating of one's own mental processes, by the omnipotence of thoughts and the technique of magic that relied on it, by the attribution of carefully graded magical powers (*mana*) to alien persons and things, and by all the inventions with which the unbounded narcissism of that period of development sought to defend itself against the unmistakable sanctions of reality.
>
> (Freud, 2003, p. 147)

In this sense, then, Chaplin can be seen to inhabit an uncanny, animistic universe, filled as it is with possessed objects, moving parts and a string of strangely disconcerting doppelgangers. In *His New Job* (1915), the first film Chaplin made after leaving Keystone, the Tramp gets into an altercation with a disconcertingly tramp-like figure (played by his one-time rival, Ben Turpin) attending the same audition as him; the impostor even assumes a number of tramp-like mannerisms (presumably a dig at both Chaplin-imitators and his old boss's search for a replacement) before inevitably ending up on the receiving end of Charlie's mallet. Elsewhere in Charlie's *oeuvre,* Chaplin tends to play both parts – a motif that can be traced (usually in the form of one rich Chaplin and one poor one) from Mr Pest and Mr Rowdy in *A Night in the Show* (1915) through the dual drunks of *The Idle Class* (1922) all the way to its most obvious manifestation in *The Great Dictator* (1940).

One of the most interesting examples of the motif occurs in *The Floorwalker* (1916) (although here Lloyd Bacon plays Charlie's double, complete with identical toilet-brush moustache), where the first figure we spot is the floorwalker of the title, a shop-floor supervisor in a large, respectable-looking department store. Although the moustache makes him *look* like Charlie (and the audience is used to seeing Chaplin play rich drunks as well as disreputable down and outs), his actions appear wholly antithetical to those of the idle, work-shy Tramp; a stickler for efficiency and productivity, the manager harries and harangues his underlings, his officiousness wholly at odds with our expectations. The viewer feels uncertain: is it him or isn't it? Hence our relief when the little fellow finally hoves into view, sampling all the shop-floor products (and managing to get himself a shave in the process), disrupting the work of Albert Austin's hangdog shop assistant, and finding himself caught again and again by the store's moving escalator. When the Tramp finally runs into his 'respectable' alter ego, the plot of the film has been firmly established: the store has gone bust and the floorwalker and his boss have decided to embezzle the safe's takings. Interestingly, as is so often the case in a Chaplin film, it is the respectable-looking bourgeois manager who is revealed to be the real crook, whereas the Tramp's minor pilfering appears as no more than a simple misdemeanour: in a similar vein, although the store detective spends his time trailing Chaplin's disreputable looking bum, the real shoplifters are all well dressed and middleclass and clean out the counter like a plague of locusts. Much more striking than any vague satirical intent, however, is the uncanny effect produced when Charlie and the manager finally meet; initially paralysed, they gaze at each other (one well-groomed, the other unkempt) as if in a mirror, each duplicating the other's movements exactly. The mimicry (itself a tried and tested vaudeville routine) is perfect; it is only when Charlie spots that the other is carrying a bag full of money that the spell is broken and he rushes across and kisses him. Thereafter, Tramp and Floorwalker swap outfits and thereby change places, each inheriting the other's problems; the manager is nabbed by the store detective while Charlie is pursued for the stolen loot. What follows is perhaps the most elaborate chase sequence in all of Chaplin's *oeuvre*, with the department-store set employed as a large, moving playground, its open-plan floors linked by elevators and escalators, up and down which the Tramp is ceaselessly chased. In essence, the whole set becomes an enormous toy – only Keaton's *The Electric House* (1922) would surpass it for ingenuity – an uncanny environment where everything moves, all its parts constantly in motion (including the tiny

figures racing to-and-fro), a toy-box animated by a sense of play rather than the managerial work ethic advanced at the movie's start. As the whizzing figures tumble from floor to floor, the distinction between the animate and inanimate also break down (as in a child's game): Charlie finds an artificial leg among the goods for sale, while a store dummy (with a particularly grotesque face) seems to collar him as he attempts to make his escape.[11]

In this context, both department-store setting and Chaplin's animistic ability to bring objects to life also suggest other processes taking place in America at this time: namely the beginnings of an incipient consumerism along with an advertising culture that would specialize in bestowing ordinary, household objects with magical, life-changing properties. Again and again in ads, inanimate objects such as cars, sofas, beds and phones take on human characteristics, the genii in the lamp promising the consumer unimagined opportunities, pleasures and abilities, a wish-fulfilment wholly in keeping with Freud's view of commodity fetishism: the embodiment of anxieties or desires within a 'sacred' object. As we saw in Chapter 1, advertising leads the consumer to see his or her purchases as extensions of identity, either as a way of investing the self with greater glamour or ability (automobiles, clothing, fragrances), or else as the means of dispelling deep-set anxieties about one's inadequacies (mouthwash, deodorant, the cleanliness of one's home). Advertising turns everything into a mirror of ourselves (which is to say, who we want to be or how we fear others might see us), a reproduction which, rather than eradicating the sacred, as Benjamin seems to suggest, displaces its supernatural 'aura' onto the heightened reality of our wholly mediated world. Indeed one might argue that through his engagement with the animate and inanimate, Chaplin also manages to elucidate one of the central cultural motifs of modernity: the enchantment (or conversely, uncanny terror) of the mechanized world.

Machine pleasures for a machine age

Consider the paintings, sculptures and mock-up models Francis Picabia constructs after his move to New York in 1915: 'a ballet of soulless machines, pistons inside cylinders, valves opening and closing, cogs driving other cogs', an X-rated Rube Goldberg or crazed mechanic's wet-dream (Hughes, 1991, p. 360). Picabia describes these erotic automata as 'machine pleasures for a machine age', pornographic blueprints, factories of masturbation. His 'Universal Posture' (1917), for example, consists of an upright male machine whose dynamo-shaped head emits

a series of obtuse technical terms into a crouching female device labelled (in a rough translation) 'Ideological Vagina'. Likewise, his painting of the virgin birth ('The Daughter Born Without a Mother' (1917)) was inspired by machine parts from one of Ford's automobile factories, a demonstration of the immaculate conception of the modern assembly system. The disturbing charge of these paintings remains surprisingly strong, however; with Picabia, as with Man Ray's mechanical menagerie of clockwork birds, animals and bodies, some parts are identifiable, but others are not, with machines either anthropomorphized into organs and spinal columns, or organic matter replicated as engine parts: tendons turned into pipes, muscles into crank-shafts, the great plug of the heart. The common factor uniting these dada-inspired doo-hickeys is a strong erotic component: things thrusting, poking, grinding. Like many other avant-garde figures of this period, Picabia was as much a showman and provocateur as he was an artist (his 1918 illustration 'A Young American Girl in a State of Nudity' (1918) was in reality a close-up of a battery), feeding upon the public outrage fermented by Duchamp's 'Nude Descending a Staircase' (1912), whose exhibition, according to one famous tall-tale of the time was raided by the New York Morals Department who then couldn't work out which bits were the dirty ones. Outrage, rather than aesthetic contemplation, was Picabia's aim, as well as a supremely cynical and misogynistic view of human relationships. 'The imposing mechanism of the male sexual apparatus lends itself to symbolization by every sort of indescribably complicated machinery', writes Freud in his *Interpretation of Dreams* (1901); for Picabia, the key word here is *imposing*: all of his machine art at one level a demonstration of phallic power and the puissance of domination.[12] Extremely wealthy, Picabia was also known for his ostentatious collection of racing cars, and for having the shell of an automobile attached to a long radial arm at the top of a tower in his mansion in the South of France, allowing him to whiz around like a fair-ground ride all day, surveying the length and breadth of his domain. You can guess the tower's shape.

Picabia's true predecessors were the Futurists, especially Filippo Marinetti, the self-professed 'most modern man in Italy', author of the Futurist manifesto, ceaseless baiter of the Italian public, and author and choreographer of avant-garde provocations such as his 'Dance of the Machine Gun' (1917). In his projected film 'Futurist Life' (from which, alas, only still images remain, with critics disagreeing as to whether the *farrago* was ever actually filmed), he advocated new mechanized forms for everyday life, including 'How a Futurist Walks' (a robotic

march), 'Sleeps' (standing up) and 'Eats' (in rhythmical, shovel-like motions). The absurdity of his suggestions, grimaces and gestures echo the Mack Sennett comedies he greatly admired. With these in mind he conceived (in an essay of 1913) of a vast 'Theatre of Amazement, Record-Breaking and Madness' dedicated to 'the type of the eccentric American' and his 'exciting grotesquery, frightening dynamism, crude jokes and enormous brutalities' – a virtually word-perfect summary of the Keystone style (Hughes, 1991, p. 40). By means of electric shocks, bright lights and collapsing ceilings, the Theatre would terrify and over-stimulate anyone foolhardy enough to step inside, an anarchist's dream of untamed slapstick, a violent, demented nickelodeon open 24 hours a day. Sadly, backers for the idea were thin on the ground (it didn't help that Marinetti's proposal was punctuated by typographical whirrs, clicks and nonsense); nevertheless, the kinship between lowbrow slapstick comedy and highbrow experimental art was philosophically strong. 'Only cinema exploits all the inventions and mechanical constructions of the machine-age,' Marinetti wrote, 'of incalculable visions and unrealizable spectacles, caricatures, abysses of ridicule and hilarity' (Hughes, 1991, p. 40). Suitably inspired, Giacomo Balla adapted Alfred Jarry's short story 'La Surmale' for the screen, in which 'Superman' (no relation) wins a race with a speeding locomotive, only to fall in love with an electric chair. In a similar vein, Germaine Dulac prepared the film *Themes and Variations* as a 'puppet-show for meat', with actors dressed as objects controlled by strings randomly pulled off-camera; in the Dada-inspired compilation film *La Ballet Mechanique* (1924), celebrated scenes by Man Ray and Dudley Murphy include animated dummies' legs dancing the Charleston as well as plunging machine parts (stiff, tube-like) arranged to suggest a series of wholly pornographic possibilities. Indeed, throughout the film the bodily and the mechanical become virtually inseparable, the movement repetitive, rhythmical and accelerated, images played either at double-speed, savagely inter-cut or else repeated again and again and again. The most famous image of *La Ballet Mechanique* is Fernand Léger's animated Charlie Chaplin in the opening credits, the Tramp transformed into a jerky cubist automaton, his limbs dancing like a series of levers and pistons, his cane the crank shaft needed to set the whole thing in motion. Most disturbing of all, however, is the Tramp's mouth – a violent, snapping shaft, filled with razor-sharp teeth, the robot Chaplin less a mechanized Nijinksy than some kind of kicking and biting machine. Léger constructed his figure from wood and cardboard (the actual animation for the sequence was by Dudley Murphy), a tailor's

dummy whittled into some kind of dangerous spinning-top. Léger writes:

> this funny little guy, a kind of living object, dry, jerky, black and white with nothing of the theatre about him … for me, he was the first image man [...] he depersonalizes himself and reaches the depths of life, the drama of human destiny, by means of the plastic rhythm of gesture and the most total silence.
>
> (Louvish, 2003, p. 178)

As Amy Sargent notes, Léger presents Chaplin as 'an indefinitely reconstructable assembly of individually identifiable parts … monochromatic, graphic, and angular' (Paulus, 2010, p. 199).

'Our droll mechanical-clown'

Indeed, in this brief sequence, Léger (whose own machine art transformed workers, soldiers and revellers into a series of inter-linked barrels, tubes and pumps, as in some kind of vast brewery) manages to capture many of the essential contradictions underpinning the image of the Tramp – his modernistic engagement with the factory age as well as his own status as detritus or waste-material. After all, although frequently (and in many ways, rightly) regarded as the embodiment of a sense of indefatigable humanism, Chaplin's image also suggests other, more uncanny, interpretations, as the little fellow is afflicted by a surprising number of mechanical tics and jerks, an involuntary jumpiness akin to an over-wound toy. Marcel Marceau, for example, describes him as 'a super marionette … pulled by invisible strings', while Siegfried Kracauer draws attention to his staccato reflexes, like the physical spasm of a machine: one only has to think about the way in which Charlie goes around corners, balanced on one leg with his cane as a second prop, or the manner by which he revs up before he runs, moving in little explosive spurts, like an engine misfiring (Lynn, 1998, p. 124). The art critic of the left-wing *Vossiche Zeitung* concludes: 'Chaplin has no soul, he himself is not a human being but only a very wise, very artistic puppet that has assumed for us a typical expression' (Louvish, 2003, p. 207). Wyndham Lewis (no fan) derided Chaplin's 'epileptic shuffle' and 'puny tinniness' (Paulus, 2010, p. 198), while even his great avant-garde supporter, Elie Faure concludes 'All humanity shudders at the sharp, angular contortions of this strangely mechanized puppet silhouette' (Paulus, 2010, p. 198).

In his 2006 lecture on 'Chaplin and the Body of Modernity', Tom Gunning argues that 'Chaplin's body could be seen at times to behave like a machinic assembly rather than an organic whole', an automated ballet pirouetting long before Léger's contribution, 'a synthesis in which the hard-edged rhythms of the machine had become part of the human sensorium' (Gunning, 2006, p. 6). For Gunning, Chaplin's limbs always seem to be in the process of falling apart, each limb somehow operating independently of the others. One can certainly see this during his tango in *The Count* (1916), in which the top and bottom halves of his body never seem to match, swivelling in different directions like the turret of a tank. When, after a brief food fight, the dance floor becomes outrageously slippery, Charlie's movements become even more eccentric, somewhere between speed skating and moon walking, each turn of his cane acting like a gearstick. It is, however, in the scrappiness of his fights rather than the delicacy of his dances where the Tramp seems most machine-like. In *The Pawnshop*, Charlie and the pawnbroker's other assistant (John Rand) take turns swinging, ducking and turning like a pair of wind-up pugilists, wind-cocks of crude laws of force and momentum. As Raymond Durgnat has noted, much of the violence in Chaplin's early shorts is reflexive: if someone presents his backside to the Tramp, his automatic response is to look for something with which to stab, kick or prick it – whether with pins, knives, or pitch-forks (Durgnat, 1969, p. 79). Even his sneaky little back-kicks, flips and brick-throwing appear as instinctive responses no different to scratching or sleeping, fight and flight hardwired into his Pavlovian responses. In *The Fireman* (1916), Charlie (who lubricates his neck from an oilcan after one particularly strenuous scuffle) jumps up, salutes, kicks and runs whenever a bell is heard – with the exception of the fire bell, of course, which he either sleeps through or blocks out with a cushion. For both Gunning and Walter Kerr, Chaplin's kinetic gift is to transfer the mechanical rhythm inherent in the cinematic apparatus to the very manner of his performance (Gunning, 2006). Hence, the Tramp's jerky skips between inertia and action (like the projector sticking), the repetitive nature of his spasms and ticks (akin to the duplicated stills of the celluloid reel), the fact that (depending on the speed of his internal cranking) he always seems to be moving either faster or slower than everybody else around him. For Kerr, this theme is present right from the Tramp's first appearance in *Kid Auto Races at Venice* (1914), in which his aggressive attempts to push his way right up to the lens of the camera suggest a kinship with the whole mechanics of cinema (Kerr, 1980, p. 22). In this reading, the Tramp moves as he really is: a series of individual cells animated

and so come to life, a zoetrope toy blown up to human size. His body is thus an extension of the whole mechanics of film, his uncertain waddle from side to side the bodily equivalent of the 'flicker' of early film, his over-sized feet and baggy pants distorted close-ups. For Kerr, Chaplin *is* cinema.

A treatise on tailor's dummies

Should we, therefore, see Charlie as the exemplar of a nascent machine-body for a new machine-age, an age, as Gunning notes, of work, efficiency and speed? Even the most cursory knowledge of Chaplin's work would seem to suggest exactly the opposite. Otis Ferguson opens his less than favourable review of Chaplin's last silent feature with the sardonic remark that '*Modern Times* is about the last thing they should have called the picture'; even before this final hold-out against sound, critics were muttering that there was something inescapably old-fashioned about Chaplin's output, as dated, in its own way, as Griffith's Victorian values (Schickel, 2006, p. 228). Part of this is down to Chaplin's seeming lack of interest in advances in film (editing, lighting, cinematography, indeed pretty much anything outside of his own performance), but the greater part appears as a consequence of the Tramp's increasingly anachronistic nature. As Charles Musser has pointed out, Chaplin's Tramp costume was only a slight comic exaggeration of the garb of real drifters, bums and hobos in the 1890s, but then became frozen in time, finally becoming an ahistorical fancy-dress outfit cut off from either class or period (Musser, 1988, p. 41). T.W. Adorno describes his first appearance in *The Gold Rush* as 'like a ghostly photograph in a lively film', an antiquated Victorian memento abandoned among the snow (Schickel, 2006, p. 268). For Slavoj Žižek, Chaplin's Tramp is best understood as a stain or blemish, some kind of dirty smudge on the lens, the dust of times past (Žižek, 2001, p. 8). In the introductory scene of *City Lights* (1931), for example, Charlie's bum (so to speak) is uncovered atop a newly unveiled statue to Peace, Patriotism and Progress, his 'dirty' physicality (the statue's sword sticks through a hole in his pants) a blot on both the white marble and the bourgeois model of a just and perfect society – given that the film, was made at the very start of the Great Depression, Chaplin's satirical implications seem clear.

For Žižek, the Tramp appears as a speck or mark on the celluloid, a hair in the gate, a human residuum antithetical to respectable cleanliness or efficiency. As Michael Chion has noted, Charlie is always *in the*

way, a one-man impediment to the smooth running of the machine, the eternal *bête noire* of the agencies of 'Time and efficiency'.[13] With his battered nineteenth-century apparel, outmoded manners and general air of dilapidation, the little fellow also resembles (especially in Chaplin's later films) a bankrupt player from the *commedia dell'arte* left adrift among the alienating materialism of the modern age, the detritus and effluvia of an older world.

It is worth remembering that, among the robotic labourers of Léger and the erogenous engineering work of Picabia, perhaps the most evocative representatives of modernity were the beggarly mannequins and bedraggled tailors' dummies of Giorgio de Chirico, roughly patched together from abandoned scraps of flotsam and jetsam, balls, balloons, old furniture, used tools and odd bits of wood, the spare parts of the modern world. Abandoned to fare for themselves upon what seems to be a limitless, purgatorial rubbish-heap, these twentieth-century monuments to waste nevertheless exude a strange, stoical dignity, an antiquated wisdom (the most famous of de Chirico's dummy paintings is called 'The Disquieting Muses' (1916)), antithetical to the frenzied animation of the constantly grinding machine parts to be found elsewhere. Expressive despite their lack of facial features (as with Charlie's boxing partner, it is the onlooker who provides the emotion), their eyeless gazes seem to take in the essential emptiness of their world, mute witnesses to a landscape in which only torn fragments remain, as in Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

In literature, the most interesting exploration of these shabby modernist totem poles can be found in the work of Bruno Schulz, often described as the Polish Kafka (and interestingly enough both Kafka and Schulz were fans of Chaplin's work). *The Street of Crocodiles* (1934) contains an extended 'Treatise on Tailors' Dummies', wherein Schulz (in the guise of his crazed philosopher-father) argues that the only appropriate matter allocated to human creation (one should bare in mind the Jewish prohibition against creating idols here) is the second-hand, the twice-used, the tattered and the threadbare: in short, rubbish, trash, junk.

> We are not concerned [...] with long-winded creations, with long-term beings. Our creatures will not be heroes of romances in many volumes. Their roles will be short, concise; their characters – without a background. Sometimes, for one gesture, for one word alone, we shall make the effort to bring them to life. We openly admit: we shall not insist either on durability or solidity of workmanship; our

> creations will be temporary, to serve for a single occasion. If they be human beings, we shall give them, for example, only one profile, one hand, one leg, the one limb needed for their role. It would be pedantic to bother about the other, unnecessary, leg. Their backs can be made of canvas or simply whitewashed [...] we shall give priority to trash. We are simply entranced and enchanted by the cheapness, shabbiness and inferiority of material.
>
> (Schulz, 1988, p. 41)

Unlike the shiny automata of the Futurists, Schulz's modern man is squalid, down at heel, haphazardly put together from meagre scraps, a crude grotesquery which also stands as a kind of philosophical justification of the brutes and clowns of early slapstick comedy. 'Can you understand,' he asks, 'the deep meaning of that weakness, that passion for coloured tissue, for paper-maché, for distemper, for oakum and sawdust?' (Schulz, 1988, p. 41). Rather than worshipping the gods of efficiency, Schulz loves the 'creaking' of his homemade hand-me-downs, matter's 'resistance, its clumsiness. We like to see behind each gesture, behind each move, its inertia, its heavy effort, its bear-like awkwardness [...] In one word, we wish to create man a second time – in the shape and semblance of a tailor's dummy' (Schulz, 1988, p. 41).

Of course, with his battered derby, patched and ill-fitting pants and general air of penury, Charlie appears close to this ideal: less a complex human being than a series of comically exaggerated gestures, his awkward waddle (like an infant who has just filled his pants), his sudden kicks, the automatic tipping of his hat. The greatness of Léger's portrait, then, is that he manages to delineate both sides of Chaplin: the wind-up toy and the scruffy, ramshackle dummy.[14] Like Schulz's mannequins, the Tramp is destined for a series of repetitive actions in a crude, sketched-in world (part of the reason why the realism of sound was death to him), less fully-rounded character than animated scarecrow. Such a status, however, is by no means grounds for mockery (as Bergson would have it); rather, Schulz argues that

> figures in a waxwork museum, even fairground parodies of dummies, must not be treated lightly. Matter never makes jokes: it is always full of the tragically serious. Who dares to think that you can play with matter, that you can shape it for a joke, that the joke will not be built in, will not eat into its fate, like destiny?
>
> (Schulz, 1988, p. 43)

The nasty little man and his nasty little walk

While one wing of modernist art embraced the machine aesthetic of the precisionists (straight lines, blocks of colour, an emotional vacuum), complete with a slavish allegiance to the managerial virtues of order and efficiency ('Man is a problem to be solved by engineers' avers draughtsman Charles Sheeler), another branch has defined modernity precisely according to what this utility leaves behind: its waste products, scraps and junk. Even the geometric shapes of early cubism, the still-startling re-composition of elements by Picasso and Braque, were made up of swiftly fading tatters and peeling paper, all murky greys and smoke-stained browns, broken bottles, discarded newspapers, the bric-a-brac of throwaway urban living. The apotheosis of all this, of course, is the work of Kurt Schwitters, whose seemingly random collages of old envelopes, used packaging and torn tram tickets transmute base materials into something that, if not gold, is at least recognizably human.

Chaplin's comedies – or at least, a great many of them – are also made out of befouled, rubbish-strewn raw materials: think of the insalubrious doss house in *Police* (1916), with its fleas, filthy beds and TB-riddled patrons, or the dirty stoops and rundown tenements of *The Kid* (1916) or *A Dog's Life* (1919), complete with foul little stalls selling greasy food to mangy passers-by. The squalid saloons and grotty food halls of Chaplin's films seem no cleaner than the inside of a spittoon, populated as they are by heavily moustachioed and grimly dishevelled brutes whose whiskers read like a menu of their last meal. This is what Chaplin brought with him from Sennett: a stress on the ugliness of urban poverty, an engagement with the base physicality of life.[15]

This proletarian vulgarity was always part of Chaplin's worldview, although his later work, of course, tempers it greatly. We are back here with Žižek's conception of the Tramp as a smudge or blemish, one of the sweepings or scrapings of modernity that respectable society prefers to leave well alone. The characterization of Charlie as 'the nasty man' with his 'nasty little walk' comes from James Agee's novel, *A Death in the Family* (1955), and summarizes genteel America's disdain for the whole idea of the tramp – a repugnance clearly rooted in class antagonism. Tom Gunning uses the quote to stress the bodily functions of the little fellow – his appetites, urges, flatulence and dirt (Gunning, 2006). They are also precisely the characteristics exorcized from the managerial model of the machine age: the blemish or stain which must be airbrushed from the picture.

Figure 3.3 Kid Auto Races at Venice (Henry Lehrman, 1914).
Source: Mack Sennett/Keystone Film Company.

The tramp in the machine

The clearest example of Chaplin's Tramp as the human equivalent of grit in the conveyor belt or dust on the cogs appears in *Modern Times* (1936) in the famed sequence where Charlie is first dragged along the assembly line and then swallowed up by the great machine. It is, after all, one of the great iconic images of modernism: the worker devoured by his workplace, the transformation of the workingman into (that dread term) human resources. As such, *Modern Times* marks the apotheosis of silent comedy's engagement with industrialization as mapped out in Chapter 2. Consider, for example, the language used by one reporter recording his impressions after a 1932 visit to Henry Ford's assembly plant in Rock Island, Illinois, for *The Tri-City Labour Review:*

> Every employee seemed to be restricted to a well-defined jerk, twist, spasm or quiver, resulting in a fliver. I never thought it possible that human beings could be reduced to such perfect automatons. I looked constantly for the wire or belt concealed about their bodies which

> kept them in motion with such marvellous clock-like precision. I failed to discover how the motive power is transmitted to these people and as it doesn't seem reasonable that human beings would willingly consent to being simplified into jerks, I assume that their wives wind them up while asleep.
>
> (Ewen, 1976, pp. 11–12)

Automata, jerks, spasms: these are central to our notion of the mechanical body. Likewise in R.L. Cruden's *The End of the Ford Myth* (1932), one worker complains of 'being driven at an inhuman pace' by the speed of Ford's assembly line. 'There was never a moment of leisure or opportunity to even turn my head [...] The men can have no rest except for 15 or 20 minutes at lunch time and can only go to the toilet when substitutes are ready to replace them' (Giedion, 1948, p. 122). And yet for all of Chaplin's engagement (and sympathy) with this theme, there is also a striking contradiction at work in the film. On the one hand, working on the production line transforms Charlie into simply another cog in the system, a fleshy extension of the factory apparatus, one of 'Henry's manikins', in the slang of the time. And yet for all that, his actions after being driven insane by the soul-shrivellingly repetitive work are both fully human and precisely in keeping with what got him into trouble in the first place – scratching, watching the women, daydreaming. His crazed dance is thus at once representative of the new mechanized order (he just can't stop tightening his nuts) and other, more animal bodily functions, a conflict central to his persona, as we have seen.

At the start of the sequence, Charlie is simply too slow, too lazy, too prone to contemplating his lunch pail or to simply staring into space (the wonderful Czech term for daydreaming is 'staring out of God's window'). In a world run by targets, quotas and productivity, such inefficiency is, of course, the worst sin of all. When he tries to skive a smoke in the gents, a video screen informs him to move on; laying down his tools for a crafty scratch, the tempo of the conveyor belt is incrementally increased.[16] Hence, the fellow's unwilling transformation from layabout to machine tool, as in order to keep up he must continue to work faster and faster, adapting to the mechanical rhythm of his environment by taking on its characteristics.

Thus, the comic-nightmare of the previous scene, in which Charlie is forced to 'consume' in accordance with the automated cadenza of the factory's new-fangled feeding machine, is both reversed and expanded: now it is Charlie who is consumed, taken in by the great tongue of the

conveyor belt and deposited in the very maw of the beast. But what kind of machine is it? Why, a movie camera, with the Tramp threaded through the mechanism like a human strip of film in a giant projector, his body squeezed between sprocket and shaft as he is slowly spooled in and out of the system (Alex Clayton notes that 'even here, in the bowels of the factory, Charlie can't refrain from giving the very bolts that bind him a little, tightening, tweak' (Clayton, 2007, p. 104)).

This is the clearest example of Chaplin's body as synthesis of man and medium, performer and the cinematic apparatus. When he emerges, he seems part automaton and part satyr, his need to keep 'screwing' (so to speak) now fixated upon the buttons running down a curvaceous secretary's behind or (in an even more risqué gag) the buttons on a buxom woman's blouse. Like Sennet's army of wind-up jumping jacks and cracked spinning tops, Charlie resembles one of Picabia's inventions run amok, an unbound libidinal mechanism jerking into life. Once again is it is the automatism of Charlie's actions which are the source of both the scene's laughter and unease. 'He's gone crazy!' cries Charlie's burly co-worker; in his *Autobiography,* Chaplin traces the origin of the sequence to newspaper stories he'd read of healthy young farm workers transformed into nervous wrecks by the sheer pace and frenzy of the Detroit assembly lines, as well as his own visit to the Dearborn automobile plant in 1921, where he was particularly struck by the machine-like gait of the workers streaming from this plant, a gait he recognized from the gyrations of his own 'droll mechanical clown'.[17] At moments like this the film is strikingly explicit in its criticism, a clear indictment of the machinery Chaplin saw as responsible for the Great Depression and consequent mass unemployment; as such, the temptation is to read *Modern Times* as a political statement that can sit comfortably alongside the speeches and articles Chaplin wrote in the early 1930s advocating higher wages, lower working hours and the restitution of the dignity of labour.[18] At other times, however, the film tends to militate against any clear political statement. After all, any kind of labour or work is the last thing Chaplin's Tramp (a figure who elevates laziness to romantic proportions) desires, and for all the claims of leftist propaganda, Charlie demonstrates little or no solidarity with his fellow workers, preferring to lounge around in jail instead.[19] In short, and notwithstanding the visit of the President of the Soviet Motion Picture Industry to the set: Stakhanov, Charlie ain't. Rather, he only returns to work when he needs to support Paulette Goddard's pretty street urchin, a configuration that, as we saw in the previous chapter, runs throughout slapstick narratives: in order to get the girl one must get some

dough (no matter how reluctantly). 'We'll get a home even if I have to work for it!' says the Tramp in one of the most telling inter-titles in the film.[20]

Indeed, as Charles Maland has pointed out, the so-called radical politics of the film are, on closer inspection, much more compromised; ultimately what the Tramp stands up for is individualism and, moreover, that old bourgeois standby: settling down with a mate and setting up home (Maland, 1989, p. 152). At the end of the movie the Tramp pins his flag to the idea of a country of just two ('the only two live figures in a world of automatons' he would later write in his autobiography – although, as we have seen, there are problems with this), with the Tramp prepared to push and shove his way past his ostensible comrades in order to fulfil the American ideal of domestic bliss. Of course, the scene where the gamine and the Tramp play mummies and daddies in a ramshackle roadside shack (and their relationship is no more adult or sexual than this) parodies the gamine's conception of 'paradise' by shifting the ideal to a constantly collapsing hovel; nevertheless, the emotional validity of this idyll is never for a moment questioned. Rather, Charlie's dream of a middleclass hearth over-flowing with milk and honey (he reaches out of the window to pluck a juicy orange while a cow conveniently passes to provide their daily pint) comes closest to reality when the vagabond pair spend the night ensconced among the material goods of a vast department store. As with the model advocated by corporate America in Chapter 1, consumerism and material goods act as a palliative to the drudgery and machine-like repetition of the factory floor, the gamine wrapped in an ermine shawl and sleeping on a queen-sized bed, a poor man's vision of what it means to be rich, as used to be said of Cecil B. DeMille's opulent features.

We are also back in the animistic department store of *The Floorwalker,* a combination playground (in the roller-skating sequence) and film set, a projection of longing straight out of Sears Roebuck. Not that Chaplin permits the idyll to thrive for long: first, starving criminals break into the store, a return of the politically repressed, and when Charlie finally wakes from his bed atop the haberdashery counter (once again his figure is confused with other objects around him), the gamine is gone and he is dragged back to jail. Fantasies of assimilation, of being accepted into respectable society, never last long in Chaplin's work. Once again what we are left with is a child's view of being an adult: a game of dressing up, of playing with the tools, but also a game that can be taken away at a moment's notice. Not for nothing does Freud define animism 'the over-estimation of the power of wishes'.[21]

Lost in the funhouse

I'd like to conclude this chapter with a consideration of a sequence that seems to encapsulate all of the themes discussed thus far: the opening, 'funhouse' sequence of *The Circus* (1928), one of the funniest set-pieces of Chaplin's career and perhaps also the most telling in terms of the uncanny nature of Charlie's 'parody automaton' (Schickel, 2006, p. 299).[22] The film opens in a setting familiar from dozens of Keystone shorts: an amusement park, complete with row after row of old peepshow devices (the very beginnings of cinema), mechanized rides and attractions, a moving walkway, and, most strikingly, a fully automated Noah's Ark, complete with robotic lions, elephants and (somewhat incongruously but inevitably for Chaplin) mechanical drunks. After some bits and pieces of comic business revolving, as usual for the Tramp, around food – including one great gag where Charlie literally takes food from a baby's mouth – the Tramp gets mixed up with a crooked pickpocket (Steve Murphy), and the film offers its first great visual gag: both men, independently pursued by the cops, fall into line alongside each other, the pair of them jogging perfectly in time. This is the film's first (but by no means last) use of the mirror motif: each looks at the other and each man sees (as in a hall of mirrors) a bigger or smaller version of himself.

Chaplin then literalizes this metaphor as the Tramp takes refuge in the pier's funhouse and (after falling off the moving runway) proceeds to lose himself in the mirror maze, the whole screen suddenly full of randomly racing tramps. The image – later recycled by Orson Welles in *The Lady from Shanghai* (1946) and then by Woody Allen in *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (1993) – also inescapably suggests the dissemination of Chaplin's image and the 'Chaplinitis' craze: bewilderingly, the Tramp seems to be both everywhere and nowhere, the substitution (in Walter Benjamin's terms) of the original for a plurality of copies, the liquidation of the original. Can this be seen (in a Freudian sense) as Chaplin's own mirror stage? Certainly, from this point on in Chaplin's career, his films become ever more acutely self-conscious: exploring his ambivalent relationship with the audience (in *The Circus* and *Limelight* (1952)); the political implications of the Tramp (in *Modern Times* and *The Great Dictator*); and his own strained relationship with women (in *City Lights* and *Monsieur Verdoux*) in increasingly explicit and self-lacerating terms. Before this point, the Tramp always seemed to belong to the realm of the infantile, the pre-oedipal, unsure as to where his infinitely malleable body ended and the tractable matter of the outside world began. *The*

Circus, then, represents a loss of innocence, Chaplin truly taking stock of his persona for perhaps the first time (and this, of course, at the end of the silent era).[23] In the Freudian model, this self-knowledge is both an inevitable step towards maturity and a terrible wrenching loss; no longer can the child believe in his or her own infinite extension. In Benjamin's view, however, the reverse – the reproduction and extension of the star's image – is perhaps even worse. Here the performer seems displaced by his own phoney image, projected everywhere and yet baring no living trace of the original (Benjamin, 1992, p. 224). One might think of the co-option of Charlie's image by International Business Machines (IBM) in the 1980s, the Tramp put back to work as an incongruous corporate logo; or else one might think back to Charlie consumed by the mechanics of film in *Modern Times,* a synthesis with his medium that might just as well turn out to be a trap.

Fleeing back out of the funhouse, Charlie avoids the cops (and bops the pickpocket) by assuming the role of an automaton, perhaps the most self-reflexive mime routine of his entire career. Under the very noses of emissaries of the law, the Tramp finds his position upon the ark, moving perfectly in time with the clockwork figures repeating their rigid, spasmodic gestures alongside him. Moving in a series of rhythmic jerks, and maniacally laughing every time he pummels his foe, the illusion is perfect, evoking (to unite both Freud and Bergson) a mixture of hilarity and unease. But why is the sight of his machine-minded laughter so striking? Perhaps because the little fellow now resembles a machine that has taken on human characteristics rather than vice versa, his gestures wholly automated. Or perhaps because our identification with the infantile Chaplin is such that his transformation into *thing* resembles a childlike wish gone awry, the toy supplanting the child, swapping places as it were. Thus, when Charlie finally breaks the illusion and scarpers (only to find himself first back in the mirror maze and then on an spinning roundabout in the circus ring: there is no way out for the Tramp here) we are taken aback: so he is alive after all! Chaplin's great achievement in film is to make his humanity count – a humanity constantly threatened by commodification, mechanization and absorption within the system.

In this sense, the fact that Charlie can transform his mechanized body into that of a tool or machine part is less important than the fact that he can turn back again, the organic (from his gurgling stomach to clumsy pratfalls to lecherous stares) reasserting itself even in the heart of the assembly line or among the parade of automata. As Winokur notes, while Bergson's machine-man lacks any sense of control, Chaplin can

choose to move in and out of the world of objects, a temporary strategy rather than state-imposed imprisonment (Winokur, 1995, p. 113). For Winokur this fantastical escape from reification is the key to Chaplin's appeal (Winokur, 1995, p. 104), his eccentric bodily contortions antithetical to the productivity, efficiency and regulation of the machine world even as he appears to mimic its movement (p. 118). As David Trotter notes, 'in acting like a machine, Charlie does not cease to be himself. He fulfils himself' (Trotter, 2007, p. 191).

For all this, some degree of uncertainty remains. To return to Louis Aragon and the surrealists, central to 'Charlot's vision' is the notion that 'objects become people and people pieces of machinery whose starting handles must be found' (Trotter, 2007, p. 193). As such, Chaplin's films can be seen to rearticulate Freud's definition of the uncanny: the confusion between the animate and the inanimate, self and other, infantile uncertainty displaced into the mechanized reality of modern life. And it is to this connection between the infantile and the bodily that we now turn.

Figure 4.1 Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle, Mabel Normand and Luke the Dog in *Fatty and Mabel Adrift* (Roscoe Arbuckle, 1916).
Source: Mack Sennett/Keystone Film Company.

4

Nobody Loves a Fat Man: Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle and Conspicuous Consumption in the US of the 1920s

In her 1993 study *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo draws on Delbert Schwarz's poem 'The Hungry Bear' to characterise the body as ursine: 'ruled by orality, by hunger, blindly mouthing experience', its 'infantile desires [...] soothed by sweet things, falling exhausted into stupor' (Bordo, 1993, p. 2). The power of Schwarz's image, Bordo believes, derives from Western culture's drive to separate body and spirit, the corporeal and the intellectual; clumsy, gross and disgusting, the body is not 'us' but a 'clumsy fool' we must drag around alongside us, a brute materiality appeased only by comfort or petting or food (Bordo, 1993, p. 3). Likewise, Alex Clayton's study of silent comedy, *The Body in Hollywood Slapstick,* stresses the idea of the body as 'a burden that holds us back', linking this notion to Bergson's stress on rigidity and clumsiness discussed in Chapter 3 (Clayton, 2007, p. 15). For Clayton, the focus on food and hunger in early comedy 'relates to the comic idea that the body is a sort of machine [...] chewing, slurping, spilling, digesting, a kind of guzzling *thing*' (Clayton, 2007, p. 35) This view of our fleshy matter as 'other', this alienation from the body, occurs again and again in records of eating disorders, an *idée fixe* afflicting both men and women, though it is, of course, most striking in terms of negative views of female consumption. Men, after all, are expected to have 'healthy appetites', to indulge their voraciousness and gorge until full – hence the advertising lexicon of 'manwiches', 'man-sized dinners', the journey 'from can to pan to man'. 'Men eat and women prepare,' Bordo notes, the received wisdom being that women demonstrate their love for their mates through food (Bordo, 1993, p. 117). This notion that men receive affection in bowl-sized portions – 'the way in which male

hunger is integrated into the network of heterosexual family and love relations' – is also accompanied by images of infantilization: men 'mothered' by their partners, reduced (despite their apparently active hunger) to a state of passive orality (Bordo, 1993, p. 117). In an interesting essay on 'Material Semiotics and a Manly Appetite', Patrick McGann argues that the source of his own issues regarding consumption can be traced back to the compulsive male search for 'fullness'. For McGann, only 'repleteness' – the bulging belly, loosened belt buckle, straining jeans – marks satisfaction, but this in turn triggers a docile 'stupor', strikingly similar to Bordo's metaphor of bear-like consumption and hibernation (Tunac, 2002, p. 86).

Contemporary theories of the bodily – generally taking their cues from Judith Butler's hugely influential *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) – stress how there can be no conception of the body prior to cultural inscription, how the body is 'performed' both in and by shared social discourse. Butler argues that 'language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it'; one cannot differentiate a 'physical body' from a 'textual' one, she argues, the physical at once a corporeal entity and an abstract, unsituated linguistic structure, rooted in discourse rather than bodily experience (Butler, 1990, pp. 43–4). In essence, we only have access to a limited lexicon of publicly available gestures: it is through the *repetition* of these gestures that we come to experience our own bodily existence.

For Butler, the body is 'a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface we call matter' (Butler, 1993, p. 9). Eventually, bodily repetition congeals into the *appearance* of reality, and in turn becomes confused with 'natural' facts. As Sara Salih puts it: 'a discursively-constructed body cannot be separated from the linguistic acts that name and constitute it'; we can only 'know' our bodies as culturally inscribed text (Salih, 2002, p. 80). Is this then the source of alienation (or separation) suggested by Bordo's metaphor of the body as unwanted companion, bulky burden, the self's eternal baggage? However, a number of contemporary critics, perhaps most strikingly Jay Prosser in his 1998 work, *Second Skins,* have questioned Butler's apparent neglect of the material and her view of the body as unattached signifier. For Prosser, Butlerian semiotics posit the body as a 'phantasmal surface', no more than the illusionary site of discursive readings (we might also note how this is a *cinematic* metaphor rather than a *theatrical* one, reinforced by repetition and reproduction), but this view of the bodily seems paradoxically to

dispense with the very materiality under discussion (Prosser, 1998, p. 7). Time and time again in Butler's writing the body seems to become light, unfettered, free-floating, able to be rewritten by competing texts, with a stress on surface text (clothing, gender, drag) which problematically elides the material depth from which human existence cannot be uncoupled.

In this context, the bulk of the silent film comedian Roscoe Fatty Arbuckle provides an interesting site for the interaction of differing cultural texts as well as ontological understandings of being. Central to this discussion is the notion that consumption triggers a shift from 'manly' appetite to feminine 'passivity', a transference achieved by the cultural impetus to read consumption as female. McGann's essay on male appetite charts a shift from virile appetite to fleshy torpidity; likewise Bordo's 1999 work, *The Male Body,* charts the shift in phallic imagery from hard to soft, the two states endowed with, as Bordo wryly notes, wildly differing connotations (Bordo, 1999, p. 43). The soft penis is vulnerable, passive, its 'little bud of life' possessed of 'a sleepy sweetness', as D.H. Lawrence puts it, a childlike object, infantile, something to be played with (Bordo, 1999, p. 43). Needless to say, such metaphors are the antithesis of the rampant, rigid, fascistic phallus which Maurizan Buscagli sees as intended to counter masculine anxieties in early twentieth-century art, including the 'machine art' of Francis Picabia discussed in the previous chapter.[1] Arbuckle's flaccid flesh – soft, regressive, needy – suggests an impotency that is acceptable when childlike, but one which cannot escape its sexual (phallic) connotations, as evidenced by his trial and subsequent demonization. For Bordo, the hard/soft dichotomy is central to our understanding of the cultural inscription of masculinity; as such Arbuckle's body can be read as a nexus for multiple sites of competing discourse, not least of which is the continuing existence of the fleshy and the flaccid in an ostensibly functional (but still sexualized) machine age.

How to be plump

Perhaps unsurprisingly, virtually all of the (usually apocryphal) stories connected with the larger-than-life silent film comedian Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle revolve around notions of appetite. One might think of Arbuckle at age 14, the champion pie-eater of Santa Anna County, California, and already tipping the scales at 215 pounds, or the famous anecdote of Roscoe tossing his gargantuan picnic across the

River Grande to Pancho Villa, the enormous feast saving the Mexican revolution by keeping its leaders alive for months (Yallop, 1976, pp. 18, 34). Indeed, when viewed from this perspective, even the sex scandal that was to destroy his career in 1921 can be seen to revolve around issues of insatiability and consumption, the demands of the flesh and the dangers of his bulk.

All of which marks out Arbuckle as the perfect representative of an age of gluttony and conspicuous consumption, the ravenous hunger of the market place. As the US transformed itself from a needs to a wants culture, embracing an inexhaustible consumerism as the essential basis of economic life, Fatty's girth provided some kind of measure of the national gluttony, or the US's voracious need to gobble down as many material goods as possible. At the same time, however, Arbuckle's comic persona also embodied a whole series of contradictions and uncertainties about this idea, contradictions that would take him from being one of the best loved of American movie stars to the most reviled. In a piece in *Movie Pictorial* in June 1914, Arbuckle told his interviewer that 'nobody loves a fat man', a line he liked so much that he used it as the final title-card of his 1918 picture, *The Roundup*. On one level, the phrase suggests the complexities and anxieties contained within the notion of the 'funny fat man', but with the benefit of hindsight, the phrase can also be seen to contain the germ of the public disaffection and animosity that would ultimately destroy him.

Interestingly, the US's first true comedy star, the now forgotten John Bunny, was also on the rotund side, a well-fed paterfamilias, who bungled his way through a series of fairly innocuous domestic farces (he called them 'jovial dramas' and hated the term slapstick) from 1911 to 1915 (Mitchell, 1998, p. 36). In Bunny's films, his protagonist's plumpness signified his eminent respectability; usually playing a doctor, a lawyer or a college professor, his size wasn't grotesque, but rather visual shorthand for a kind of comfortable conformity, proof that his character was well off and prosperous, a well-upholstered pillar of the community. Indeed, when taken as a whole, his films have a kind of well-fed complacency about them. While minor misunderstandings may occur (a misread glance or a broken vase), nothing terrible can truly happen. In *The Troublesome Stepdaughters* (1912), his only crime is to treat his offspring as tiny children rather than young ladies; in *A Cure for Pokeritis* (1912), his wife catches him sneaking off for a clandestine meeting with his poker-playing chums. Neither of these are anything other than sedately 'dramatic'; the humour is likewise gentle and reconciliatory.

Rather, it as if the sheer solidity of Bunny's bourgeois world acts as a kind of defence against the bewildering violence of the Keystone comedies.

In many ways, Bunny's dignified bulk is in keeping with a late nineteenth-century understanding of weight, which equated the ample form with success and social status. Large meals, groaning tables and strained shirtfronts were all signs that one had made it: a connoisseur, a gourmand, a big man in every sense. A few extra pounds were seen as a sign of rude health. As late as 1880, books with titles such as *How to Be Plump* were still being published, which recommended eating starchy foods, fats and sweets in order to achieve a florid plumpness (Levenstein, 1988, p. 12). At John Harvey Kellogg's famous Battle Creek Sanatorium, underweight patients were subjected to 26 feedings a day, and forced to lie motionless in bed with sandbags on their bellies in order to aid the absorption of nutrients. Physical activity of any kind – even brushing one's teeth – was seen to be a dangerous waste of calories (Levenstein, 1998, p. 92). All one had to do to be well was consume.

Moreover, as Hillel Schwartz has pointed out, this was also the age of the rest cure – neurotic patients taken away from their families, confined to bed, tranquillized and overfed until they fell into a replete stupor, transformed into round, plump, adult babies, helpless and infantilized (which is also, of course, another way of reading Arbuckle's comic persona) (Schwartz, 1986, p. 71). The most famous advocate of the rest cure was Silas Weir Mitchell, known in the popular press as Professor Morphia, who argued that the plague of the modern age was a form of over-stimulation, 'Neurasthenia' or frayed nerves, a condition which could only be remedied by a mixture of seclusion and sedation. As Schwartz writes of Weir Mitchell:

> He placed his patients in opaque wombs of darkness, sleep, milk, massage, gentle electrical currents and strictly enforced boredom. The body, the mind and time itself were suspended while the patient lay inches away from trance, a sleep-eater, slowly gaining weight and believing in a greater power.
>
> (Schwartz, 1986, p. 72)

As patients, such as the novelist Charlotte Perkins Gilman, discovered to their cost, this was also an authoritarian cure, predicated upon breaking the 'highly strung' individual's will, remoulding his or

her sense of self and surroundings.[2] This dismantling of the patient's ego-boundaries, replaced by a more fluid sense of self, prone to identification with others and indulgence in narcotic, hallucinatory fantasy, also provides a fascinating link with the idea of cinema itself: namely the notion of being lulled into a passive, hypnotic state, losing one's sense of self via an absolute relationship with the screen. With audiences comfortably cocooned in a sedentary, well-fed space, rational disbelief willingly suspended, film seems to suggest a mass cultural form of the very cure Weir Mitchell was advocating at the end of the nineteenth century: swapping one's self for a new, more malleable dream-self. In an age of manic exhaustion, passivity seems the only answer.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, however, social ailments were changing. Intemperance and gluttony, rather than neurasthenia, had become the national concern: stomach pains, ulcers, acid attacks, heart problems and gas. Rather than bulk appearing as a sign of contentment, of a kind of groundedness and prosperous achievement, obesity increasingly appeared to be the curse of an over-indulgent abundance. 'Who can expect greatness, wisdom or honesty from a nation [...] fed on pies and heavy bread?', asks nutritionist Mary J. Lincoln in 1913 (Schwartz, 1986, p. 22). In consequence to this shift in public perception, a whole series of pseudo-scientific food fads that sought to transform the American diet proliferated, the most famous, or infamous, being 'Fletcherism' or enforced mastication. Named after its chief proponent, Horace Fletcher, Fletcherism preached that there is a mechanism in the back of the mouth whose filter function performed much of the digestive process. In order to activate and fully utilize this mechanism, it is important that food should be chewed until it contains absolutely no taste (in practice around a 100 times per mouthful) and only then swallowed. Moreover, there should be no conversation at the dinner table, as this would interfere with the process by distracting one from one's calculations: what counted was sober, concentrated chewing.

Alongside this sternly puritanical notion (pleasure in eating was not a consideration), time and motion specialist Frederick Winslow Taylor advocated transforming one's kitchen into a 'housekeeping experiment station', a kind of domestic production line, mathematically designed for maximum return from a minimum of labour. The home was becoming an extension of the factory: efficient, scientific, mathematically calculable. Too much food clogs the human machine, Taylor claimed, overtaxing the digestive system and ultimately decreasing

fertility (Schwartz, 1986, p. 80). Indeed most of the food fads from this period hid behind a whole series of pseudo-scientific rationales, from Kellogg's belief that meat was a chemical aphrodisiac that encouraged excessive masturbation, to Salisbury's 'all beef diet', which argued that vegetables drained IQ and reduced humans to a bovine state. Fletcher himself claimed that his chewing technique had cured him of gout, headaches, colds, boils and, most importantly, a lack of interest in life or work. He also claimed that he only needed to pass his bowels every five days and that the end result was perfectly spherical and small and possessed 'no more odour than a hot biscuit': his insides could process waste so cleanly 'they could be expelled into one's hands and posted to interested parties' (Armstrong, 1988, p. 43). Previously an ill man, Fletcher could now lift a 300-pound weight 350 times in rapid succession, using his calf muscles alone. Moreover, tales of his newfound physical endurance were legendary – from hacking his way through dense jungles in the Philippines to wading though deep snow for 11 hours after an avalanche in the Himalayas. Like Taylor, Fletcher saw the body as 'a scientifically managed factory' whose aim was the elimination of waste (Armstrong, 1988, p. 43). Excess, extravagance, squalor: the very things Thorstein Veblen attacked in modern capitalism, Fletcher wrestled with in excretion.

While all this might sound like simple Hucksterism, there were many at the time who took him seriously, from authors such as Upton Sinclair and Henry James (who famously called him 'my saviour') to Oxford and Yale Universities, which carried out exhaustive tests confirming Fletcher's beliefs and prowess. However, there were other forces that were changing the American diet. During the First World War, Herbert Hoover, also a keen Fletcherite, was placed in charge of the United States Food Administration, which was set up to counter fears of food hoarding, shortages, inflation and riots. Smaller portions were now patriotic, as was the avoidance of waste: 'Lick your plate and lick the Kaiser', ran one campaign. Moreover, post-war US was a different place. In many people's eyes, this had been an old man's war that had threatened to wipe out a generation: the result was a cult of youth, a veneration of the budding souls who had fallen on the battlefield. Modernity implied the new, the emergent. The future belonged to the young; they alone seemed at ease with the bewildering pace of technological change, cued into the new culture of swiftly changing fashions and patterns of consumer behaviour.

As Harvey Levenstein has noted, 'gold watch chains surmounting gigantic bellies were now signs of age and decrepitude in a culture

focused on youthful zest' (Levenstein, 1998, p. 165). By 1918, the idea that being overweight was unhealthy was starting to displace fears of malnutrition and anaemic paucity. Whereas most of the remedies of previous years had been directed towards curing skinny people, the years 1917–1920 saw being overweight and underweight reach a new balance in public concern. Indeed, by the end of 1921 – the same year, one should note, as the Arbuckle scandal – everything had changed: the dieting industry was in full flood, and while fat had once appeared as an asset, it now seemed an ugly, embarrassing liability.

Back between 1886 and 1903 gentlemen could boast of being members of The Fat Men's Club of Connecticut, gorging themselves on vast feasts of ten courses. Between 1885 and 1889, and again from 1893 to 1897, Grover Cleveland ('Uncle Jumbo') was in the White House, his prodigious stomach, he proudly proclaimed, 'the product of good beer and German food'. The times, however, were changing. Cleveland's successor, William Taft, was also a large man, but was ridiculed in political cartoons as a kewpie doll, sleepy, babyish and weak. Thorstein Veblen coined the phrase 'conspicuous consumption' and attacked capitalist hoggishness in his *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). By the start of the twentieth century, insults like butterball, jumbo and porky began to appear for the first time. At a meeting of the National Press Club in 1920, Senator Harry Ashurst of Arizona proclaimed: 'to think of a man being fat and noble is like thinking of an iron balloon or lazy lightning. Nothing fat ever enlightened the world' (Schwartz, 1986, p. 180). Ashurst ridiculed politicians of the past, especially Taft, who had once become stuck in the White House bath tub and, on a visit to Japan, had to have a whole village turn out to help push his rickshaw along the streets. Modern man had to be streamlined, well constructed, a perfect piece of engineering. A perfect example of this was Charles Atlas (real name Angelo Siciliano), who was named the World's Most Beautiful Man in 1922 and who started up his mail-order health-manual business in the same year. Atlas was also the subject of Barnarr MacFadden's 1923 book, *Manhood and Marriage,* which argues that 'for building manhood, it is absolutely essential that you should make yourself physically as perfect as possible' (Studlar, 1996, p. 30). The body had to be actively remoulded, taking on a new, streamlined, efficient shape, in keeping with the sleek modernism of the time.

In order to avoid being seen as 'well-fed Doras', flappers chewed Sylph Reducing Gum or smoked Lucky Strikes to keep themselves

slim: 'Reach for a Lucky instead of a Sweet', ran one campaign. The plump curves of the hardy Gibson Girl were displaced by the slender boyish frame of the modern young woman, her juvenile lack of curves as streamlined as a skyscraper. 'Reducing has become a national pastime, a craze, a fanaticism,' claims an article in the *New York Times* in 1925. When the Commissioner for Public Health put a set of scales in the lobby of City Hall in 1922 there were queues around the block. Sometime later, a phonogram was added to make the first Speak Your Weight machine – previously bells had rung if the individual exceeded the average level. In the midst of such a frenzy, the overweight weren't even safe at home: the first domestic scales intended for home use were patented in 1918 and sold steadily throughout the decade. Symptomatically, the most famous brand was The Detector: even in the bathroom there was no place to hide. In response to new information about obesity and health problems, life insurance companies racked up their premiums, the corpulent regarded as a very bad class of lives: 'The longer the belt-line, the shorter the lifeline', one insurance booklet notes (Schwartz, 1986, p. 155). Meanwhile, science offered more revolutionary techniques. As early as 1914, Peter J. Peel opened his first reducing salon in Chicago; there, fat-reducing machines enveloped male clients in two sets of rollers that were said to smooth the abdomen. By 1916, the machines had ball bearings mounted on steel springs, which could speed up and down the body, up to 80 times a minute. If that didn't work, even more radical means were required: electrical chairs which transmitted fairly high voltages, contracting (it was claimed) patients' muscles 100 times a minute, the equivalent of a ten-mile run in a heavy sweater. Electrodes were wrapped in wet towels and held in place by bags of sand; later, complicated systems of vibrations and electrical impulses to the heart were introduced.

In a sense, the central problem was as much philosophical as dietary: fat simply wasn't modern. Fashion designers looked to the sleek lines and aerodynamic forms of speeding automobiles and thrusting skyscrapers, a machine aesthetic that embraced clothes, advertising and packaging. The future was dynamic, accelerated, kinetic: one had to race in order to keep up, embrace the vigorous, souped-up tenor of the age. As Anne Douglas notes, the 1920s presented a new kind of bodily ideal: the human form as efficient machine (Douglas, 1996, p. 53). The seeds of this can be traced back at least as far as Jules Etienne Maray's kinetic photographs, in which, for the first time, one

sees the body transformed into straight lines and mobile equations of motion, trajectory and force (Christie, 1994, pp. 71–2). Actual fleshiness disappears in these calculations, corporality nothing more than dead weight. In this vision of the future, the body as matter simply disappears; little wonder that a few extra pounds simply did not compute. Fatness was awkward, unbalanced, uneconomical. Food was to be seen first and foremost as fuel, calories acting as calculable units in a new economic model. As Schwartz notes, even chemistry seemed to support this. Proteins were light, modern, active, responsive, alert and rational. Fats and starches were heavy, old-fashioned, slugabed and sentimental. Proteins had jobs to do and they got on with them; fats just lay about, bloated and sentimental (Schwartz, 1986, p. 99).

There are, however, paradoxes and ironies attendant with this notion. While modern advertising and fashion turned its back on the gormandizing 'Big Man' of the previous generation, consumption, in all its aspects, actually increased enormously in the 1920s, household expenditure tripling between 1919 and 1929 (May, 1980, p. 30). As we have seen in Chapter 1, the American economy was predicated upon conspicuous consumption as an attempt to absorb over-production after the First World War. Each American had to be persuaded to buy and to buy lavishly, retail therapy as one's patriotic duty. This, in turn, required a complete transformation of the American work ethic; Americans had to think of buying not as an extravagance, but as their reason for being.

Moreover, despite ostensible changes in fashion, there was little evidence that the average American was actually losing any weight in the 1920s; rather, advances in the canning industry and industrialized food processing (a bigger industry by the end of the 1920s than either iron or steel) instituted the start of a convenience culture, which continues to this day. Nor was this the only factor threatening to bulk out those sleek modern lines: the increasingly sedentary environment of office work and automobile travel also contributed to the modern US's predisposition towards the rotund. American popular culture may have been worried about its waistline but the nubile stars idolized on screen were by no means representative of (to use an unfortunate turn of phrase) the great masses at large. Indeed, from this perspective it makes more sense to read the fears of over-indulgence as a kind of collective anxiety, an anxiety centred on the notion of moving away from away from puritan ideals of abstinence and self-restraint to a sinless model of endless self-gratification and pleasure.

Figure 4.2 Buster Keaton and Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle in *The Garage* (Roscoe Arbuckle, 1920).
Source: Roscoe Arbuckle. Paramount Pictures.

The soft machine

It is also important to take into account widespread fears regarding the decline of masculinity that were also taking centre stage in American culture at this time. After all, the US had been founded on the values of abstinence, restraint and austerity often perceived to be the most manly of the Puritan virtues. For the Pilgrim Fathers (and the patriarchal stress is clear here), any trace of self-indulgence, selfishness or moral laxity was anathema; for the fledgling community to survive among the savage wilderness, all personal feelings had to be sacrificed for the good of the group, a communal mindset that paradoxically rubbed up alongside an assertion of rugged self-sufficiency. As Michael S. Kimmel notes in his essay 'The Contemporary Crisis of Masculinity in Historical Perspective', the American frontier provided 'a fertile environment for an expansive American manhood', the taming of the west exemplifying the values of what would later come to be seen as the American work ethic: diligence, stoicism, selflessness (Brod, 1987, p. 137). Only the strongest and most virile could hope to survive the new continent's hostile environment.

The weak, the cowardly, the uncommitted: these were unlikely to see out the first winter.

Even if such patriarchal values had hewn a mighty country from the untamed emptiness, what had any of this to do with the realities of modern life? Whether comfortably sequestered in his luxurious office or seated behind the wheel of his well-appointed automobile, modern man now seemed almost wholly protected from the privation of his forefathers. His central problem was no longer scarcity or want, but rather drowning in a kind of pampered over-abundance. One marker of this shift was the fact that the leading cause of death in the US was no longer tuberculosis, a disease rooted in poverty and privation, but rather heart attacks, indicative of excessive indulgence and gluttony (Susman, 1984, p. 112). Cut off from nature, physical toil and the certain beliefs of his forefathers, modern man now faced the perils of pernicious luxury and leisure. In such an environment, how was one to prove one's masculine worth? The de-skilling of labour in the modern workplace, whether on the production line or, worse still, in the white-collar office, created a form of standardized routine that threatened to render previous notions of masculine ability redundant. No longer could the American male prove his work by the fruits of his toil: in a world of paperwork and production lines, everyone else was producing exactly the same thing. Nor was physical prowess still central to notions of labour. Increased bureaucracy and administration had created an army of pen pushers and form checkers, mere salaried employees rather than self-sufficient individuals. Critics argued that puritan self-denial had been replaced by modern rapacity, a belly-worshipping culture licking its chops at the extravagant variety of consumer goods on display. 'Urban life is producing a generation of pathetic, pampered, physically and mentally enfeebled weaklings', thunders one editorial, before going on to encourage more men to follow the example of Joseph Knowles, the famous survival expert (Mintz and Roberts, 1999, p. 2). In a publicity stunt in July 1913, Knowles entered the woods of Maine, buck-naked and with neither matches nor knife. He emerged again in October, garbed in bearskin and telling waiting reporters that all Americans needed to tighten up. Now, there was a *real* man: unless one returned to the wilderness and the values of rugged individualism it engendered, modern man faced a future of corpulence, moral flabbiness and effeminacy (Studlar, 1996, p. 62).

Dieting ads painted a picture of slothful male bellies drooping closer and closer to the ground, succumbing to the temptations of rich, fatty foods and a lack of physical exercise (Schwartz, 1986, p. 97). Young boys,

who might once have honed their bodies by swimming in creeks or shinning up trees, now spent their time playing with pennies on street corners, or, worse still, whiling away the hours in the smoky darkness of movie theatres (Studlar, 1996, p. 33). 'Spectatoritis', announced Chief Scout Ernest Thompson Seaton, 'has turned robust, manly, self-reliant boyhood into a lot of flat-chested cigarette smokers with shaky nerves and doubtful virility' (Brod, 1987, p. 148). Indeed, it was precisely to counter such corruption that boys' clubs such as the Boy Scouts of America, the Woodcraft Indians and The Sons of Daniel Boone, mostly set up in the 1880s during a wave of backwoods nostalgia, assumed a new prominence, even pre-eminence in the 1920s (Studlar, 1996, p. 25). Mollycoddled by their mothers, and sissified by matronly Sunday school teachers, modern youth needed to rediscover the rugged play and strenuous exercise of the pioneer past: or, as C.R.H. Jackson put it, 'the greatest danger is not that the boy will be too brutal, but that he will be too soft, too easily discouraged, too weak; not that men will be too manly, but that they will not have sufficient manliness' (Studlar, 1996, p. 10). The virile brand of 'muscular Christianity', propounded by preachers such as Billy Sunday ('Jesus was no dough-faced, lick spittle opossum [...] [but] the greatest scrapper who ever lived'), as well as the twentieth-century stress on sport as a cure-all remedy for modern leniency ('Bicycling' announced one pamphlet, acts as 'an indispensable remedy for artificiality and effeteness'), suggest the degree to which traditional 'manliness' felt itself under siege from sissifying forces (Brod, 1987, pp. 143, 139).

Of course, changes in gender roles also had a key role to play in this much-trumpeted crisis of masculinity. The Nineteenth Amendment and the increasing number of women entering the workforce (albeit on much lower wages and usually in menial or subservient positions) triggered a vast swathe of literature to the effect that the US was becoming increasingly feminized. Purity campaigners, prohibitionists, romantic novelists: all these earned the ire of H.L. Mencken and *The Smart Set* and were attacked as symbols of the genteel petticoat stifling a vigorous 'male' US. Mom ruled the roost at home, while female school marms were busy curbing natural masculine exuberance, turning boys into mooncalves and milksops. However, the central source of this anxiety, as we saw in Chapter 1, revolves around in the ever-increasing centrality of consumerism in American life: men, in Rita Felski's words, 'feminized by the castrating effects of an ever more pervasive commodification' (Felski, 1995, p. 62). From this point of view, the female shopper epitomized a new age of *female* consumption, rather than *male*

production; it was now women who both determined the family budget and decided on the key purchases central to American identity and social standing – from home decorating to clothing to the make of one's automobile, that most clichéd of phallic symbols. For many commentators, modern consumerism, with its stress on desire, yearning and the sensual materiality of skilfully marketed goods, was taking American culture further and further away from its puritan roots, auguring a new age of (implicitly female) gratification and sinful pleasure. And, as we already have seen, film also played a part in this. Product placement in Hollywood movies enticed receptive audience members to believe that they too could live out that lifestyle, while fantasies of ease and glamour tempted ever more viewers to model themselves according to patterns of self-satisfaction and wishful thinking. Once again, as Felski notes, there is a persistently gendered subtext to all of this; after all, ever since the days of the Nickelodeon, the audience for moving pictures had been overwhelmingly composed of women and children, film-going regarded as an inherently passive, and therefore unmanly, activity (Felski, 1995, p. 63). For critics of this upstart branch of the entertainment industry, the practice was inherently iniquitous and unhealthy, encouraging lust, laziness, poor posture and the gaining of weight. Movie-going represented an unseemly indulgence in a feminized world of idle fancy and make-believe, a form of infantilization, making babies of us all. Indeed, fears of becoming a kind of over-coddled toddler were every bit as central to the cultural atmosphere of the time as a dread of becoming feminized; consider, for example, F. Scott Fitzgerald's attack on the 'nursery kingdom' of modern America in *Tender Is the Night* (1934), 'the clean-sweeping irrational temper that had broken the moral back of a race and made a nursery out of a continent' (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 253). Overweight, childlike, strangely effeminate: in many ways these sketch out the implicit complexities of Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle's persona, his bulk a kind of metaphor for the malaise affecting the modern male.

Fatty joins the force

While never as disturbing an adult baby as Harry Langdon (see Chapter 8), Arbuckle's persona was still that of a child in adult clothing, whether as some kind of village idiot or country bumpkin, or as a middle-aged man who remains at heart a petulant infant, excitable and dependent. As Sam Stoloff notes, he played 'henpecked husbands, bashful farm boys, cooks, butchers and (when in drag) coy ingenues',

but what links all these is a mixture of 'infancy' and 'cheerful maliciousness': 'his Humpty Dumpty face [...] framed by hair as silky as a baby's, and with a corresponding amoral quality to his glee' (Bachman, 2002, pp. 152, 159). Indeed, in many of his films, his persona seems to shift uncertainly between adult and monstrously inflated toddler: in *Fatty Joins the Force* (1913), for example, he is both a respectable grown up member of the bourgeoisie and (when he loses his uniform) the fat kid picked upon by the other young scamps. Even as a married man, Arbuckle's response to a kiss is either to wipe his mouth and stick out his tongue (at least if his wife is a harridan, as in *Fatty's Chance Acquaintance* (1915)), or else to pop a fat digit in his mouth straight afterwards, an expression of confused orality repeated again and again in his films. Wives in Arbuckle movies tend to be either bullies (his wife in *Chance Acquaintance* won't give him money for an ice cream so he is forced to try and steal her purse like a naughty schoolboy) or mothers (dressing 'Fatty', feeding him, picking up the pieces when things go wrong); when he strays, as he does repeatedly in his early films, he tends to be lured away more by the chance of a snatched soda or slice of cake (*Chance Acquaintance* again, or with Mabel Normand in *Fatty and Mabel's Wash Day* (1915)) rather than more adult or carnal desires. Indeed, alongside the notion of a man as an overgrown baby, Arbuckle's films also stress the motif of a baby's appetite blown up to gargantuan proportions. In *Backstage* (1919), Arbuckle's billposter shyly tastes his bucket of paste and then stuffs the whole brush in his mouth; when later he visits the strong man's assistant in hospital, he ends up eating all the fruit he brought along to give her. Indeed, perhaps unsurprisingly given Arbuckle's size and weight, food figures strongly in most of his films. Time and time again Arbuckle is cast as some kind of cook or chef or soda jerk, Roscoe's favourite routine of dextrously flipping pancakes from griddle to shoe to hat happily repeated whenever comic invention flags. Moreover, food provides Arbuckle's most reliable prop, from stereotypical pie-throwing (most obviously in his early work with Sennett, but also as late as *The Butcher Boy* (1917) alongside Buster Keaton), to his dance of the bread rolls in *The Rough-House* (1917, nearly a decade before Chaplin appropriated the routine for *The Gold Rush* (1926)) and on to endless gags constructed around spilled soup, foul-smelling onions or melting ice cream. In *The Waiter's Ball* (1916), the ingredients on the menu come startlingly to life, from a crawling Limburger cheese to an escaped fried fish. The sheer physicality of eating is also a recurring motif: his 1918 short, *The Cook*, begins with a spaghetti-eating contest in which the coils of pasta seem to go on forever, while in *The Butcher-Boy* Fatty cheerfully

hangs various hunks of meat up on coat-hooks before matter-of-factly hacking off a turkey's tail. Several of his films feature tight close-ups of generously filled mouths gustily chomping: in *The Waiters Ball,* Alice Lake is horrified by repeated shots of walrus-moustachioed clients noisily masticating; by way of contrast, a later Arbuckle heroine, Alice Mann in *His Wedding Night* (1917), is shown stuffing a whole water-melon slice between her dainty red lips.

Interestingly, in Arbuckle's films one motif occurs again and again: whether he's been caught by his wife chasing some young thing, or simply swiping a freshly baked pie from the kitchen counter, Roscoe looks straight to camera and fixes the audience with his trademark, beseeching grin, the epitome of the naughty child asking for forgiveness. Arbuckle deploys this shot in virtually every one of his movies, and while it is very different from Chaplin's appeal for pathos, it operates on a similarly basic level: Fatty, the kid who can't help it, whose appetites are greater than his restraint, but whose innocence disarms any thought of punishment or responsibility. Was this, then, the key to Arbuckle's huge popularity? Forgiveness for all our childish failings, all our insatiable appetites (as co-star and onetime girlfriend Viola Dana said of Arbuckle: 'he was like a loveable little kid whose hand might have been caught in the cookie jar. How could you dislike him?' (Oderman, 1994, p. 16))? After all, by the time of the 1920s, babies provided one of the last positive images of plumpness; indeed the best-selling toy of the decade was the 'Bye-Lo Baby', a round, short-armed and very pink doll modelled on Maud Humphrey's postcards of her own fleshy bundle of joy – the astonishingly round child who would grow up to take the name Humphrey Bogart. From *The Katzenjamer Kids* to *The Roly Polys, Dolly Dimples* to *Freckles and His Friends,* the Campbell's soup kids to Kewpie dolls, baby-fat radiated a halo of innocence, an aura wholly absent from images of obese, hoggish adulthood. In essence, fat was funny, as long as it remained wrapped around a cherub. From this it followed that the fat man was a jolly figure of fun as long as he remained childlike.

Arbuckle, however, loathed his comedy sobriquet; 'Fatty,' he told studio boss Joseph Schenk, 'might be a term of endearment for a newborn baby, but it was not complimentary to a grown man' (Oderman, 1994, p. 116). And yet, for box-office purposes, 'Fatty' he remained; given this, it's clear to see that Arbuckle's enormous appetite – overeating, alcoholism and later his alleged heroin addiction – was linked to a kind of sadomasochistic pact, a willing transformation into the fat clown he always feared he truly was.[3] His enormous popularity (especially with

women and children) provided, of course, some measure of compensation in all of this, but his comic persona also ran the risk of toppling over into a much more negative stereotype: namely that of the overweight, overfed, pampered modern man.

Arbuckle's androgyny is also a striking factor in all of this. His very earliest films at Keystone have a tendency to cast him antithetically as either the heavy (hulking, aggressive, brutish) or else as a comically inappropriate woman, dragged up to play Sennett's wife or an absurd object of attraction. There is, of course, an element of cruelty and misogyny in many of these films – women of the time were supposed to be demure and dainty, while Arbuckle is enormous and unwieldy, frequently pointing to his own breasts or enormous behind as if mocking the very business of being a woman. Interestingly, however, as his career (and his female roles) developed, the idea of 'Miss Fatty' began to seem less and less like deliberate miscasting and increasingly as an integral part of his routine. Perhaps surprisingly, Arbuckle made an unexpectedly convincing female lead, coquettish, graceful and oddly delicate despite all that bulk (Louise Brooks remembers Roscoe as 'a fine dancer [...] like floating in the arms of a huge doughnut – really delightful' (McPherson, 2004, p. 48).[4] Indeed, so believable was Arbuckle as 'Miss Fatty', his films were increasingly forced to break this feminine illusion either by acts of deliberate crudity (Arbuckle's grossness proving that he's really a man) or explicitly foregrounding in the narrative that Arbuckle's character *is* male but needs to dress up as a woman in order to further the plot (generally either to rescue his sweetheart or to spy on women – in either scenario, a legitimate masculine goal). Thus in *The Butcher Boy*, for example, when Roscoe and Al St John infiltrate Miss Teachem's boarding school for girls, their real identities are only discovered after much belching, scratching and poor table manners. In *Coney Island* (1917), right up to the moment when Roscoe removes his wig, he seems very much at home among the lotions and potions of the ladies' changing room, one of the gals; when he gets found out, he simply grins and simpers even more convincingly. Indeed, a playful effeminacy runs through many of the films he directed himself, whether dressed in Mary Pickford curls and sharing a room with Al St John in *The Butcher Boy,* playing patty-cake with a flagrantly gay hotel guest in *The Bell Boy* (1918), or putting on a ball gown when his tux fails to turn up in *The Waiters' Ball* and whiling away the evening dancing with old men.

For critics fearful of a national decline in the all-American man, casting the modern male as a feminized baby, Arbuckle appeared as clear evidence for the prosecution. Other traits also connected Roscoe to

what Rita Felski terms 'the persistently gendered subtext of modernity': his love of shopping, his ostentatious taste in consumer goods, his dandyish fashion and (feminine) stress on luxury (Felski, 1995, p. 63). At the height of his fame, Arbuckle moved into what had once been Theda Bara's luxurious mock Tudor mansion, an outrageously lavish pile which included a drawing room that could seat 200, a chandelier with a thousand candles, and a $75,000 Chinese rug. Likewise, to get to the Comique studio, Roscoe drove a $25,000 custom-made Pierce-Arrow convertible, complete with cocktail bar and built-in toilet: this was conspicuous consumption writ large. Press stories, such as 'Feeding with Fatty', recorded vast feasts and gourmandizing on a grand scale: mere publicity puff, of course, but contributing nevertheless to his larger-than-life persona, a persona which seemed to his critics to embody the very essence of the indulgent malaise afflicting modern man. As Sam Stoloff notes in his essay on Arbuckle and Hollywood consolidation, 'because film actors had come to be seen by some as representative of a modern degenerate culture of wealth, these anxieties were largely an extension of other fears: middleclass fears about class disorder and moral decay' (Bachman, 2002, p. 149). As such, 'Arbuckle's outsized frame became the focus of general social anxieties concerning bodily excess and bodily control in a changing social and economic environment' (Bachman, 2002, p. 150). What then, if Arbuckle's attempts to disarm the bullies failed? What if his audience turned on him, willing to forgive his gluttony no longer? After all, as American culture entered the 1920s, fat also had a number of much more negative connotations – being unable to control one's own appetite, fat as weight, mass, size – all of which could be seen, in an unsympathetic light, as profoundly threatening.

The beast and the bulk

When considering Arbuckle's persona, it is also worth remembering that all of the other leading silent film comedians were more or less on the miniature side (even Keaton at 5 feet and 6 inches was pretty dainty) while truly big guys were inevitably cast as the heavies – one need only think of Mack Swain (discussed in Chapter 2), Eric Campbell, Joe Roberts or Keaton Snr. There was, of course, a good reason for this: as slapstick functions via a kind of benign regression, so the spectator is called upon to identify with the smallest, the weakest, the most vulnerable, a child comically adrift in a world of adults. Arbuckle's persona certainly conforms to this, but at the same time his sheer mass and size threatens

to unbalance the equation. Many of his early Keystone shorts (especially *The Knockout* (1914) and *Leading Lizzie Astray* (1914)) stress Fatty's super-human strength and burliness; in the former, he plays with a 500-pound weight like a rattle, while in the later, he throws one poor sap through a wall and then tosses a grand piano after him. Indeed, perhaps the strangest (or at least most atypical) of Arbuckle's Keystone movies is *Fatty's New Role* (1915), in which he is cast as a dangerous and violent tramp, a bellicose, bestubbled drifter whose innate aggression lacks any kind of childish connotation. And though Arbuckle was never again called upon to play the heavy so explicitly, it's also true that his combination of great strength and congenital idiocy could be problematic in many of his other pictures as well.[5] The 'village idiot' persona of his rural films (especially in *Leading Lizzie Astray,* but also with Buster Keaton in *The Hayseed* (1919), among others) also has more ambivalent undertones: idiocy and ignorance in a large body suggesting a kind of feebleminded, imbecilic violence. In this context, one might also think of Benjy in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) or Lennie Small in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), both children in adult bodies, but also (at least potentially) sexual threats.

This, then, is the antithesis of the idea of the fat man as neutered pet: the contrary notion of bulk as something profoundly intimidating. Joanne Rapf, in her essay on Arbuckle's time at Keystone, stresses how his work foregrounds 'a disturbing combination of childish behaviour and adult drives' (Rapf, 2010, p. 68), while Sam Stollof argues that the question of whether the fat body is 'desexualized' or 'overly sexualized' is linked to Freud's notion of the infant's insatiable sexual feelings (Stoloff, 2002, p. 160). Classical Freudianism characterized over-eating as a regressive orality, the inability to leave behind oral satisfactions for genital procreation. Fearful of adult sexuality, the obese retreated behind a shield of fat, substituting food for sex, turning themselves into oversized infants in the process. For Freud, the very repulsiveness of their appearance (Freud loathed fat people) cut them off from any possibility of sexual activity; over-eating, according to psychoanalysis, is a clear example of sublimation, swapping one appetite for another, a notion which, as we have seen, is central to Arbuckle's *oeuvre* (Freud, 1976, p. 355). The most successful of Arbuckle's Keystone films were those he made with Mabel Normand, and they still retain an air of uncloying sweetness that is effective to this day.[6] Even when ostensibly playing husband and wife, Roscoe and Mabel act more like brother and sister, asexual playmates, pals – Fatty's role is simply too babyish to suggest any connotations of adult sexuality. In *Fatty & Mabel's Simple Life* (1915)

for example, their 'relationship' is like that of primary-school children: 'Fatty' is first introduced eating from the cow feed bucket, Mabel playfully mollycoddling a young calf. Although some of the milking jokes have a kind of rural earthiness about them (Mabel carefully squeezing the teat to squirt Fatty in the eye, then feeding him long-distance) they are also almost self-consciously regressive; even Arbuckle's sexual gesture of wiggling his fingers through a hole in Mabel's fence (and then squirting his hose through) appears innocently unknowing. Any degree if physicality in the Fatty and Mabel movies is always sublimated into childish play, Roscoe rough-housing with women, jumping on top of them and wrestling them to the ground, but nothing beyond such horseplay. Even the Keystone stress on pie throwing can be seen as an extension of this, creamy substances squirted everywhere (including repeatedly into Mabel's face!) as a kind of innocent substitution. In this sense, the messiness of slapstick comedy displaces bodily fluids; the pie in the face suggests that they have yet to leave the kindergarten of the oral phase.

However, an uncharacteristic work from the tail-end of their comic partnership, 1916s *He Did and He Didn't* (the perfect title, surely, for any film about the Arbuckle court case), suggests the inherent tensions involved in maintaining this charmed state of guilelessness. Here, Arbuckle plays a respectable, John Bunnyesque doctor, who suspects that his wife (Normand) is still in love with her college sweetheart who has come to visit; when Mabel is forced to seek sanctuary in her old flame's room because a dangerous burglar has broken in to the family home, Arbuckle returns and catches the two in their bed clothes. While Keystone movies tend to take notions of infidelity pretty lightly (presumably because in most films it was the man who was shown to be doing the erring), here Fatty flies into a terrible rage, tosses the old flame out of the window, and then strangles Mabel with his great hulking paws. Suddenly we seem closer to the violent uxoricide of Von Stroheim's *Greed* (1924) (whose chief protagonist, McTeague is also part cherub and part brute, switching suddenly between childishly cooing over his pet bird and primitive acts of violence) than the knockabout farce of Keystone comedy. Needless to say, the situation is resolved by the pat explanation that all this is just a dream (though Arbuckle's dream then blurs into the dream of the old lover, Jack, which climaxes with Fatty gunned down – a move likely to further disorientate and confound the audience) and the film ends with a beseeching smile from Fatty as he re-enters the marital bedchamber. The film, however, disturbs to a much larger degree than it entertains: without the alibi of childish innocence,

Arbuckle's persona suddenly seems much darker and more ambivalent than it first appeared.

The monster in the bathroom

Such intimations, of course, acquire greater pertinence in hindsight, brought into sharp focus by the infamous court case that rocked Hollywood, destroyed Arbuckle's career and ushered in 40 years of severe self-censorship. In 1921 Arbuckle was accused of raping and murdering a young starlet, Virginia Rappé, in a drunken orgy in San Francisco; throughout the subsequent court case, prosecution lawyers employed the most negative connotations of being overweight in order to vilify Arbuckle – they talked of his 'elephantine' bulk, his copious man-breasts, a 'fat man's foulness' (Oderman, 1994, p. 158). Newspaper reports talked about an avalanche of weight, a disgusting mountain of flesh; the Hearst press in particular characterized Arbuckle as a 'brute' and a 'hulk': 'Fatty sold me more papers than the sinking of the *Lusitania*', Hearst reportedly quipped later (Yallop, 1976, pp. 131, 138).[7] In all of this, two central myths persisted: that Rappé had been crushed to death beneath Arbuckle, and that Arbuckle, impotent as a result of his obesity, had raped her with a coke bottle. Both rumours directly drew their power from, as we have seen, specific cultural anxieties regarding weight and size; suddenly fat had become evil again, the fat man unable to control his porcine body or its loathsome urges.[8] Even Roscoe's close friend, Adele Rogers St John, realized that his great size would condemn him: 'The image of a fat man and a little girl was found repulsive by a great many people' she later wrote; 'nobody loved a fat man when sex was involved' (Oderman, 1994, p. 164). Criminologists and experts in physiognomy studied Arbuckle's cranium, palms and body shape, declaring him to be liable to perform rape or sexual assault; fatness was a threat, a physical grossness inimical to civilized folk. Lawyer Earl Rogers refused to take the defence case, baldly stating that 'Arbuckle's weight will damn him. He is charged with an attack on a young girl which resulted in her death. He will no longer be the roly-poly, good-natured, funny 350 pound fat-man everybody loves. He will become a monster' (Yallop, 1976, p. 179). While friends such as Keaton and Chaplin were warned by their publicists not to get involved for fear of being tarred with the same brush, others in Hollywood lined up to attack Arbuckle, as if to somehow differentiate themselves from his sordid appetites. Gloria Swanson described him as 'a fat, coarse, vulgar man'; Arbuckle's old director at Keystone (and one of Rappé's many lovers),

Henry Lehrman, characterized him as 'the kind who resort to cocaine and opium and who participate in orgies that are of the lowest character' (Oderman, 1994, p. 157). Even Arbuckle's wife, otherwise loyally supportive, described him as 'a big overgrown baby who couldn't handle his success' (Oderman, 1994, p. 159). This stress on bloated excess was central to the press coverage; one editorial by a Presbyterian minister in New York lambasted his 'disgraceful debauchery' and 'pathological licentiousness', sordid traits that could easily be discerned in the 'abominable filth' of his films (Oderman, 1994, p. 200). While other more virile or romantic stars weathered comparable scandals (one might think of John Gilbert, or even the late Wallace Reid, who died of drug addiction but who was widely seen as the innocent victim of a pernicious environment), Arbuckle's weight only served to drag him ever deeper into the mire.

Indeed, in many ways the most interesting (and disturbing) aspect of the whole case is the violence with which the American public turned upon him. Seemingly overnight, devotion turned to disgust. Angry crowds picketed the screenings of Arbuckle's comedies (including the unfortunately named *The Life of the Party*), and all new releases were immediately shelved. Crowds waited outside the courtroom, hysterically baying for his blood, spitting, screaming, presaging the volatile crowds in Nathanael West's *Day of the Locust* (1939). Here was the unstable crowd, so feared by 1920s commentators, in its most inchoate guise: the vengeful mass, turning on the star with such vehemence precisely because they had loved his image so completely before. The sackloads of hate mail, immense barrage of threatening phone calls and busloads of abusive filmgoers driving past Arbuckle's home, all suggest an audience's ghoulish delight in turning on that which it once venerated, as well as the degree of public betrayal involved in the tearing away of Fatty's cherubic mask. Suddenly Arbuckle's films seemed somehow different, the fault lines in his comic persona clear for all to see. It was as if the comic licence outlined earlier had been instantaneously and irrevocably revoked; breaking the rules became crimes once again, with consequences to be accounted for, and punishment to be meted out. While audiences had once forgiven Arbuckle for his irresponsibility, indeed even vicariously taken part in his invitation to childlike playfulness, they now seemed to turn on him with the full weight of a collective guilty conscience.

After all, at nearly 300 pounds, Arbuckle was simply the most visible symbol of Hollywood excess, and therefore particularly vulnerable to cultural anxieties regarding gross consumption, moral laxity and the

easy money to be made by pandering to the lowest instincts of the great unwashed. But it is specifically within the contexts of consumerism and masculinity that the hysteria regarding the case makes the most sense: Arbuckle 'the fatted calf' sacrificed to atone for the insatiable modern appetite (Oderman, 1994, p. 254). As Stoloff notes:

> Anxieties about loss of bodily control in an economy dominated by corporations, about the excesses that consumerism enabled and provoked, and about maintaining a proper distinction between the sexes in the new age of woman's suffrage and bobbed hair – all found an object in the round, reviled figure of Arbuckle.
>
> (qtd in Bachman, 2002, p. 162)

The significance of the Arbuckle case, therefore, extended far beyond the willed regression of slapstick comedy. Summing up the case during the first trial, Judge Lazarus grandiloquently asserted:

> We are trying our present day morals, our present day social conditions, our present day looseness of thought and lack of social balance. The issue here is really and truly larger than the guilt or innocence of this poor, unfortunate individual; the issue is universal and grows out of conditions which are a matter of comment and notoriety to every lover and protector of our national institutions.
>
> (qtd in Oderman, 1994, p. 201)

Gluttony and rapacity were key factors in the reporting of the trial, the voracious consumption of bootleg liquor central to both the prosecution and the way in which the case was perceived by the public at large. While most of the American population still hypocritically (and illegally) imbibed, the nation's puritan conscience also required an outlet for its resentment and guilt, a notion which can also be applied to other forms of gross consumption and greed as well. Frank Woods, head of the screenwriters' union, commented during the case that 'Arbuckle made the mistake of thinking that in eating and drinking lay all the joys of life', before hypocritically adding 'but I do not believe in pre-judging' (qtd in Oderman, 1994, p. 185). The moral parable here revolved around notions of over-consumption. One of the other key stories connected with the case was the suggestion that Arbuckle had hosted an orgy for paramount execs at Mishawom Manor mere days before the fatal party with Virginia Rappé, a banquet at which naked call girls were served up on giant platters, dressed only in sprigs of salad as a garnish

(Oderman, 1994, p. 98). In reality, Arbuckle was never in attendance – although Paramount head, Adolph Zukor, who went on to take such a strong line on Arbuckle's 'immoral' behaviour, certainly was – but the story, still being repeated as late as Kenneth Anger's *Hollywood Babylon*, encapsulates all the unconscious elements of the affair, the dark side of consumerism, the excesses of uninhibited cravings unleashed.

The aftermath of the case has, of course, been well documented: the appointment of Will Hays as Hollywood's self-regulating censor in chief, the creation of the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America, the setting up of the production code which would affect films for the next 30 years, and the banning of Arbuckle – even after his eventual acquittal – from the screen.[9] But in many ways the Arbuckle case is most interesting in terms of what it says about the 1920s and the newly emergent consumer culture. Certainly the cultural weather of the times was against him: resentment regarding the excesses of the idle rich, a fear of a national lowering of moral standards, and perhaps most importantly a collective backlash against an orgiastic world of over-abundance not yet assimilated by the agencies of advertising and public relations. But perhaps Arbuckle's real misfortune was to inhabit a comic persona who made the key components of consumerism – regression, materialism, conspicuous consumption – simply too, well, conspicuous. After all, the new consumer culture was in itself merely an extension of old ideas of the rest cure, swapping real satisfaction for oral gratification. Marketing men in the 1920s increasingly saw the consumer as needy, neurotic and infantile: bloated over-sized babies, corpulent, passive, their soft mouths permanently open. And perhaps it was the guilty recognition of this that explains the vehemence of the public response and the violence of his professional crucifixion.

The burden of the bodily

In a 1921 *Photoplay* interview, Arbuckle ruefully states 'I prophecy that the fat man is about to have his day. He will be sought, chased, even mobbed, because there will not be enough of him to go round, not individually but as an institution' (qtd in Yallop, 1976, p. 193). The time of Arbuckle's arrest and trial (1921/1922) occurs during the period when cultural understandings of weight and obesity were shifting in the US, Arbuckle's girth uniquely encapsulating anxieties regarding masculinity, consumerism and infantilization central to the decade. There certainly would be other 'fat' comedians – in 1925 'Fat' Karr, 'Tiny' Alexander and 'Kewpie' Ross teamed up to form 'A Ton of Fun', whose titles include

The Heavy Parade (1926) and *Three Fleshy Devils* (1926) – but their fleshiness would remain wholly asexual, either childlike or gelded, a pattern to which even Oliver Hardy's henpecked husband or overgrown big brother would conform. Arbuckle's true crime, however, was to embody the notion of over-consumption and all its attendant anxieties, anxieties which also resurface in arguments regarding 'corporeal' and 'textualist' readings of the body in contemporary theory.

Of course for all his fondness for drag, and the disconcerting playfulness of his role as 'Miss Fatty', it is probably stretching things too far to read Arbuckle's persona as an example of 'gender trouble' in the Butlerian sense. After all, Butler argues that many mainstream examples of comedic cross-dressing, from *Some Like It Hot* (1959) to *Tootsie* (1982), actually reinforce the boundaries between male and female, gay and straight, this 'high het entertainment' acting as 'a ritualistic release from a heterosexual economy that must constantly police its own boundaries against the invasion of queerness' (Butler, 1993, p. 126). Rather, Arbuckle's excessive, unruly body acts as the site for a number of competing texts inscribing complex notions of masculinity, consumerism and appetite in the early twentieth-century US. One might indeed argue that rather than suggesting the essential 'performativity' of gender, Arbuckle's films – and the scandal connected to his onscreen persona – suggest how discourse on masculinity cannot be divorced from the corporeal, or the bodily. In this, Arbuckle is very much the subject rather than the author of the semiotic codes of the time, a victim of 'the regulatory frame' that is both the creation of consumer culture and a reflection of its deepest anxieties (Butler, 1990, p. 33). The multiple meanings of 'appetite' – in terms of food, sexuality or consumerism – and its relation to the male body (hard/soft, active/inert, mechanized/feminized), offer new ways of interpreting early twentieth-century shifts in masculinity, as well as suggesting the vexed question of our relationship to the bodily, which remain with us to this day.

Figure 5.1 Publicity still from *Mickey* (F. Richard Jones/James Young, 1918).
Source: Mabel Normand Feature Film Company.

5

Dizzy Doras and Big-Eyed Beauties: Mabel Normand and the Notion of the Female Clown

Almost submerged among Claude Lévi-Strauss's vast body of work on kinship and communication, one can find hidden away an utterly bizarre list of prohibitions (or sins), whose practice were believed across the Malay archipelago to cause 'storms and tempests'. The most important of these taboos relates to a ban on inter-kin marriage (which is to say, incest), but the list also includes warnings regarding 'incorrect speech', 'ill-considered (or foolish) conversation, boisterous play, over-demonstrative happiness, imitating the calls of certain animals or birds, laughing at one's face in a mirror and 'dressing a monkey as a man' (Cowie, 2000, p. 52). At the centre of this aboriginal ban on slapstick lies a warning against the misuse of language, a prohibition on gestures or words that are meaningless – indeed, any kind of willed confusion or nonsense which might disrupt the prescribed flow of communication. Disguises, dressing up, imitation, wild gestures: all these are barred because of their interruption of the strict rules by which the tribes or clans of the region must relate to one another. Marriage is the most important element within this dialogue, Lévi-Strauss argues, as it is the primary mode of interaction necessary to the perpetuation of society. Hence his famous statement that the rites and rituals regarding marriage represent language in its most primal state, whereby what is exchanged is 'woman as sign', female clan-members circulated in an identical way to words (Kaplan, 2000, p. 50).

This contentious notion, seized upon by feminist theorists and anthropologists alike, has been open to a wide variety of interpretations. Lévi-Strauss links femininity to its biological and social functions, stressing that worth (brides are valuable commodities) is linked to scarcity, sexuality, food gathering and, most obviously, procreation. However, as Elizabeth Cowie has argued, this is to read women as symbols or

Figure 5.2 Keystone Film Poster, 1912, Keystone Film Company.

exchange-objects, rather than as a sign in the true structuralist sense (Cowie, 2000, p. 60). Rather than focusing on, say, the actual transportation and exchange of potential mates, Cowie's radical reading of Lévi-Strauss's theory relates to woman's essential role in the whole process of signification, her role as sign or word. In accordance with true structuralist thinking, Cowie argues that the sign 'woman' shouldn't be interpreted in relation to stereotypically feminine characteristics, but rather is determined by its role in the system, a role which, in a patriarchal society, is defined primarily in terms of being 'not-man'. Indeed, 'woman' stands both for not-man and not-from-my-tribe; the alterity of the sign is thus central to how clans define themselves in relation

to others, with exogamy the means of instigating a complex web of communication.

Cowie ultimately links this notion back to the prohibition against incest. 'Incest (inter-kin relations) is the misuse of women as signs', she argues, 'since it is not using women in the way reserved for signs, which is to be communicated' (Cowie, 2000, p. 53). We thus return to the crime of miscommunication with which we opened: a prohibition against interactions in which nothing is exchanged. Women are only valuable as signs if they are passed on, their 'worth' semiotic rather than reproductive.

'Woman as sign' and 'Woman as token of exchange': this chapter explores these theoretical ideas in terms of the changing role of the 'new woman' in the early part of the twentieth century. As noted in Chapter 2, Mabel Normand's role in many early Keystone comedies is as a marker to be won, fought over and swapped, at times little more than a toy in a playground tussle. At the same time, however, uncertainties regarding Normand's persona also suggest the possibility of disruption and rebellion; as Lévi-Strauss concludes, 'woman could not become a sign and nothing more since even in a man's world she is still a person, and insofar as she is defined as a sign she must also be recognised as a generator of signs' (qtd in Kaplan, 2000, p. 54). What follows, then, is an exploration of these two possibilities: Mabel as sign and Mabel as generator of signs in an overwhelmingly male genre.

The sugar on the Keystone grapefruit

Producer Hal Roach remembered Normand as 'the wildest girl in Hollywood' and 'the dirtiest talking girl you ever heard'. With other actresses at Mack Sennett's Keystone studios, she formed a gang called 'the dirty four', taking turns to come up with the most colourful obscenities to shock male technicians, cameramen and (the hardest to shake of all) riggers and carpenters. Roach claimed to have witnessed Mabel somersaulting across the Keystone lot to illustrate the fact that she wasn't wearing any panties, and recalls her showing up naked when her chauffeur called outside her bungalow, cheerfully trilling that she'd 'be right down' (Yallop, 1976, p. 56). Mack Sennett, Mabel's on/off fiancé during her early years at Keystone, unequivocally rebuffs such claims, however: 'in all personal things she never violated good taste' he claims in his autobiography. Similarly, her close friend, journalist Adele Rogers St John, described her as 'unusually pure – no desire, no sex, no nothing', arguing that her reputation for sexual daring was the furthest thing

Figure 5.3 Poster of *Mabel's Lovers* (Mack Sennett, 1912).
Source: Keystone Film Company.

from the truth (qtd in Louvish, 2003, p. 118). Chaplin remembered her as one of the boys, 'a good fellow', but more interested in practical jokes (tossing firecrackers into the editing room: and this with nitrate stock!) than the films she was making. Indeed, he famously refused to be directed by her: 'Charming as Mabel was, I doubted her competence' he notes sniffily in *My Autobiography,* believing that she lacked any interest in what he loftily termed 'the cultural sphere' (Chaplin, 1964, p. 103). Yet, when police questioned her over the murder of Hollywood director William Desmond Taylor, they found a copy of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* among the peanut shells on the back

seat of her sports car, while Taylor's last gift to her was a copy of Nietzsche.

These are by no means the least of the contradictions and uncertainties which beset any biographical investigation of Normand. She was present at (or at least near to) the scene of two famous Hollywood shootings, but events surrounding both seem irredeemably murky. Was she a befuddled heroin and cocaine addict, or, in the words of Herbert Howe who interviewed her in 1922, 'a brilliant, charming intellectual of lightning wit' (Fussell, 1982, p. 186)? Mabel herself was little help. To one journalist, she would show off her prized volumes of Schopenhauer in her well-appointed library; to the next she would claim that because of her impoverished upbringing, she could hardly read (her favourite quote came from her old boss Sam Goldwyn, who said of *The Wizard of Oz,* 'part of it I read all the way through'). Nor did she take particular care to keep her own story straight: she usually chose Boston as her favoured location to be born in, but would from time to time substitute this for a plantation in Atlanta or a childhood spent travelling with her shady uncle 'who was in trade in the Far East'. Other times she told hair-raising tales of her life as an orphan in Hell's Kitchen, elucidating in purple prose the drudgery of the garment district, the threat of white slavers, her brush with tuberculosis at age eight. Her imagination, like that of most Americans of the time, perhaps, was drawn towards the very rich and the very poor, but she felt no obligation to tell the truth. She campaigned for the socialist party, but also passed herself off as a devotee of polo, 'having received the gift of a famous polo pony once owned by Lord Tweedmouth' (King, 2009, p. 227). 'I give others what they want to see', she admitted (qtd in Fussell, 1982, p. 7), and it is perhaps this willingness to embody the desires (and assumptions) of those around her which provides the key to her mercurial persona, an uncertain sign within the patriarchal code.

This sense of indeterminacy in many ways applies to her onscreen persona as well. Was she a clown, like Chaplin or Keaton, or a foil, the straight girl, the stereotypical object of desire, lusted after by the male grotesques of the Keystone lot? Even her 'look' seems tantalizingly ambiguous. Pretty, alluring, usually well dressed in layers of taffeta and velvet (Normand had started off as a model for Charles Dana Gibson advertising hats, cold cream, shoes, stockings, combs, hair tonic, veils, gloves, lingerie, evening wraps and furs), she nevertheless suggested a subtle sense of exaggeration. She was very small (just 5 feet) and, despite her egg-timer waist, very round, rather like the number eight or two scoops of ice cream. Her amazingly expressive marionette head, slightly

too big for her body and therefore comic in itself, was dominated by fog-lamp eyes, while below the knee her feet turned inwards and moved more like a farmer than a dancer. But was she funny? Molly Haskell describes her as 'an irritating blend of seductress and practical joker', unable to escape the patriarchal bind that 'a female comedian automatically disqualifies herself as an object of desire' (Haskell, 1974, p. 62). In terms of the male gaze, the notion of a 'sexy clown' is an oxymoron, Haskell suggests: evidence of which is provided by a letter in *Photoplay* magazine in 1916 asking whether a 'pretty girl could ever be funny', before concluding that male audiences wished only to 'moon' at a pretty girl and 'poke' (presumably fun) at an ugly one. What, then, were the chances of a 'female Chaplin' or any kind of slapstick comedienne, given the context of early twentieth-century definitions of femininity?[1] And how does the notion of the female clown sit with ideas of the 'new woman' in the turn-of-the-century US?

Dressing the new woman

Lois W. Banner notes in *Women in Modern America* that the 'new woman' of the 1890s was

> easily identifiable by her new style of dress. Instead of yards of trailing petticoats and beribboned gowns [...] she wore a dark suit or a simple blouse or 'shirtwaist', modelled after men's attire. Her skirts may not have risen above her ankles, but if she were particularly daring, she might loosen her corset, that torture instrument of Victorian dress, which gave women eighteen inch waistlines, fainting spells and sometimes even permanent damage to internal organs.
>
> (Banner, 1974, p. 20)

That the new woman was still defined by her attire rather than her politics, education or social role is, of course, in itself telling (in 1840 health reformers Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were subject to public ridicule after advocating that all modern women should don baggy trousers and a loose-fitting tunic called a 'bloomer') as is the fact that the Gibson Girl (of which Normand was one) was held up as its visual 'type', in the words of *Life* magazine, 'a healthy and athletic maiden, simply dressed'.

Prints of Gibson drawings were hung in homes across the US (Gibson even designed an alluring wallpaper print, suggestively entitled 'Suitable for a Bachelor's Apartment'), at a stroke rescuing images of sensual

feminine beauty from the painted nails of the vamp. Wholesome, chaste and 'maidenly', the Gibson Girl was also a body in motion; true, not in terms of employment, but instead pictured playing tennis, golf, dancing, riding, even driving an automobile. The mass divestment of crinoline and corsetry was thus a sartorial response to the need for active, vigorous movement. Prior to the late nineteenth century, wearing clothes in which one might be expected to do anything more than a little light reading was reserved for the working classes, the factory labourers or farmers' wives; the whole point of nineteenth-century display was to stress its impracticality, an implicit association with leisure and wealth. The Gibson Girl remained in this sphere (ads in upmarket magazines typically revolved around courtship and marriage) but was now free to express a new kind of healthy exuberance. Martha Banta, in *Imaging American Women,* argues that the image of the new woman was an attempt to reconcile various competing 'types' – 'The Beautiful Charmer', 'New England Woman', 'The Outdoors Pal' – into a new kind of taxonomy (Banta, 1987, p. 46). This new 'American' type was more vigorous, youthful and 'innocent' than her European counterparts, emblematic, in Gibson's words, of 'the nation's vaunted independence of spirit and profound self confidence'.

Gibson sold his first drawings to *Life* in 1886 when he was just 19, his fluent profile style intended to capture the 'essence' of modern youth. Just five years later, the *New York World* was reporting that 'before Gibson synthesised this ideal woman, the American girl was vague, nondescript, inchoate' (Banta, 1987, p. 212). His penmanship perfectly complemented new methods of mass reproduction and publication:

> The lines of his pen and ink [. . .] seldom still. They writhe into the far corners of the illustration, then circle back into the energetic centres of action . . . Gibson's sense of perspective, the control he holds over outline, the inspired use he makes of silhouettes, the sweep of the diagonals that tilt his verticals and horizontals into motion: all testify to his remarkable asperity as a master of the pure forms carved out of space.
>
> (Banta, 1987, p. 212)

With a little artistic licence, such a description can also be applied to the athletic, mobile, diving figure of Mabel (who posed for Gibson in 1908), both pure and masked at the same time.

However, one must also be careful to stress that not all visual representations of the new woman were quite so positive. In 1895 the

New York World ran an illustration combing the facial features of prominent 'new women', including Susan B. Anthony, Frances E. Willard and Mary Livermore, into a single stern, medusa-like gaze. Her dark eyes stare out at the reader beneath a tangled forest of hair and above a slightly curled moustache. The journal concludes by asking the (male) reader 'whether he would like to marry the woman pictured here'. Needless to say, no brand of novelty wallpaper was released to accompany it.

A slap from a perfumed hand

Indeed, uncertainties regarding the new woman in many ways lay at the heart of the dubiety of both Mabel's roles, both on screen and off. Watching Normand's early comedies, particularly the ones made at Keystone between 1912 and 1916, it's hard to delineate any essential persona among her performances, at least in the same way as one might think of Chaplin's Tramp or Keaton's stoic. She plays country tomboys and urban seductresses, shrewish *hausfraus* and pretty girls in parks, con women and virtuous young ladies; at times she seems morally affronted by the vulgar goings on (all that punching, kicking and pie-throwing), staring straight at the camera with an expression of moral indignation, while at other times, she gleefully joins in with the melee, spitting, slapping, lobbing a well-aimed brick (*Mabel's Big Day* (1913), for example, is pretty much wholly concerned with the exchange of missiles). In some shorts, only her prettiness differentiates her from the gorilla-like heavies and severely moustachioed ogres of Sennett's world; elsewhere as well, the thankless task of acting as the male comic's object of desire leaves her with very little to actually *do*. In *That Little Band of Gold* (1915), Mabel merely reacts to Arbuckle's antics, her only 'gag' being when she compares her flat chest to the buxom curves of her rival; in *The Fatal Mallet* (1914), Mabel simply looks bored while Chaplin, Sennett and Swain pass her around like a prettily wrapped parcel.

Central to all of this is the question of Mabel's feigned (or otherwise) submissiveness, her apparent exasperation with the chaos twinned with her gleeful participation in it. Does one read her apparent respectability as subversion and duplicity, an impersonation (and parody) of the genteel tradition, or does her uncertain shift between ingénue and clown suggest the impossibility of reconciling physical comedy with femininity? In film after film, from *The Gusher* (1913) to *Caught in a Cabaret* (1914), Mabel spends most of her time with arms crossed, looking affronted, the reluctant recipient of the male paw. Elsewhere she appears as the stereotypical victim, tied up in front of a rifle primed to fire when

the grandfather clock (!) strikes 12 (*At Twelve O' Clock* (1913)), or bound to the railroad tracks by Ford Sterling in an archetypal silent movie still in *Barry Oldfield's Race for a Life* (1913) – albeit in ways which suggest broad parody of the Pearl Whites of this world, Sennett's film a clear spoof.

This is not to say that Mabel couldn't also be extraordinarily active, of course. In film after film she is pictured running, cycling, swimming, riding horses, flying airplanes, firing six-shooters. Normand was a great physical athlete, able to take terrific pratfalls and dive from great heights, evidence of a rough and tumble physicality far removed from nineteenth-century modes of female propriety. But does this make her a comic? One might argue that early twentieth-century audiences saw such shockingly unfeminine antics as themselves intrinsically unnatural and therefore absurd, the antithesis of what Lori Landy calls 'the docile female body' (Landy, 1998, p. 6). Thus, Mabel flying a bi-plane in *A Dash Through the Clouds* (1912), rescuing her beau from the air with all guns blazing is comic precisely because of its reversal of gender roles: for audiences of the time, no further parody of the genre was required.[2]

Mabel takes a pie in the face in *The Fatal Mallet*, is plopped in the mud in *A Muddy Romance* (1913) and knocked flat on her derriere in most films, but she rarely, if ever, initiates the chaos; indeed, compared to the antisocial activities and mindless vandalism going on all around her, Mabel seems an oasis of beauty and normality – which is another way of saying that the tag of 'the female Chaplin' doesn't really ring true.

Indeed, one has to go back to her pre-Keystone movies (even though most of these have now been lost) to see the seeds of a more genuinely subversive comic creation. Straight out of modelling and aged only 16, Normand made all kinds of movies for Biograph: melodramas, comedies, chase films, sports films. Interestingly, D.W. Griffith tended to cast her as a villain, an erotic temptress or wayward best friend, contrasting Normand's fleshy, womanly allure with the almost ascetic saintliness of his favoured actresses – Blanche Sweet in *The Eternal Mother* (1912), for example. For Griffith, Mabel's physicality and stress on the bodily were negative characteristics deserving of punishment rather than laughter, an aberration of the feminine ideal. Mack Sennett – who would take Mabel with him to Keystone and become her fiancé – certainly saw things differently, although he too was at pains to translate this physicality from the erotic to the wholesome. He shot *The Diving Girl* in 1909 (not to be confused with Normand's first Keystone film, *The Water Nymph* made in 1912), which not only made Mabel the lead for the first time, but also initiated the whole cycle of 'bathing beauty' films, which

he would still be peddling in the late 1920s. Dressed in a fetching one-piece bathing suit, Mabel's body is certainly on the screen, but only as a symbol of youthful exuberance and athletic ability: 'as pure and sweet as a scoop of ice cream', as the studio publicity puts it. As if to compensate for the amount of flesh on display, the film goes to great lengths to stress the innocence and virtue of its heroine, whose youth permits such a stress on the physical. The result is what seems like the most chaste of all Sennett's films, although it's true that audiences of the time might not have seen it that way; it is worth pointing out that Mabel's one piece bather was known as the 'Kellerman tights' after Annette Kellerman, the champion diver who scandalized the US by wearing a swimming suit without stockings or bloomers, and indeed was arrested for doing so in Boston in 1909.[3] Pointedly, Griffith explicitly barred Sennett from putting Mabel in an identical outfit for *The Diving Girl,* and ordered that her bare legs be covered – she was only permitted to don her 'fleshings' after she'd left with Sennett to set up Keystone in 1912.[4] But even in the Keystone films, there's still a tendency to portray Mabel as a child-woman, her physicality coded as effervescent and spirited rather than in any way sexual. Sennett's autobiography immortalizes Mabel as 'the actress who ate ice cream for breakfast', carefully eliding her problems with alcohol, drugs and lovers. 'Mabel was frisky, as skittering as a water-bug and, oh my Lord, how pretty! She turned any place she was into an uproar and if she couldn't think up better things to do she would pull the chairs from under fat men' he claims (qtd in Louvish, 2003, p. 46). This infantilization is particularly apparent in the films she made with Fatty Arbuckle (and discussed in Chapter 4), in which the two appear as playmates, scamps, babes in the wood. In *Wished on Mabel* (1915), Mabel skips off with Arbuckle's hen-pecked husband, but only to enjoy a stolen ice cream soda; in *Mabel's Wilful Way* (1915) she slips away from her stuffy parents and is followed by two disreputable suitors, only to be eventually caught and unceremoniously spanked, her age uncomfortably fluid throughout.

Indeed, even when Mabel finally gets her own feature, *Mickey,* directed by F. Richard Jones and James Young in 1918, the 26-year-old Mabel is cast as a 12-year-old tomboy, the rural setting of the movie further underlying her bucolic innocence (Sennett always believed that Normand grew up on a farm in rural Providence; in reality, she grew up on Staten Island, New York). Raised by a grizzled prospector and Native American nursemaid (complete with fetching pipe), Mickey's innocence permits even a tastefully shot nude scene (one might compare and contrast with Hedy Lammar in Gustav Machaty's *Ecstasy* (1933)), her

skinny-dip admiringly observed by her eventual suitor. Everything else about the movie is strikingly 'pure' or playful, however. In a clear echo of *Fatty and Mabel Adrift* (1916), their courtship and engagement is also delicately framed in terms of silhouette and shadow, reminiscent of a Victorian keepsake or cameo; when the couple first kisses, he passionately caresses one of her hands, then pauses and blows the dirt from the other.

In all this, Normand appears closer to Mary Pickford than Clara Bow, her energies innocent and passions sexless, just as her friend Adele St Rogers claims. *Mickey* was a huge commercial success, spawning spin-off shirts, socks, ice creams, a hit song and accompanying sheet music, but her career stalled thereafter. Dogged by health issues and persistent rumours of hard-drug use, Sam Goldwyn's attempt to relaunch her as a glamorous, mature clothes-horse in the mould of Gloria Swanson, stalled; instead, she found herself teamed with Teddy the Studio Dog, and forced back to 'tomboy' or orphan roles she was plainly too old (and too ill) to play. By far the best and most interesting of her later films is *The Extra Girl* (F. Richard Jones, 1923), even though the script insists that she opens the movie cast in the role of a star-struck teenager, unbecomingly dressed in a series of sack-like dresses and shot so as to appear squat and dumpy rather than petite, a rag-doll with the stuffing in all the wrong places. Indeed, the film offers in many ways an extremely unflattering view of her career: a woefully bad romantic lead (she rolls her eyes akin to Valentino, intoning 'Ah, my Sheik' into the mirror), once she arrives in Hollywood (escaping on a cart marked 'General Merchandise') Mabel finds herself cast purely as the childlike clown. Her big screen test is ruined when first she gets a hulking great brick awkwardly stuck to her shoe and then a large black glove stuck to her behind, both clear examples of her failure to embody the ladylike stereotype required.

Alas, *The Extra Girl* itself doesn't seem quite sure what to do with Mabel either; the comic scene involving the escaped lion is oddly played less for laughs than drama (ending with Mabel being rescued by her boyfriend's enormous hose), a sequence repeated when a supine Mabel must again be rescued from her crazed suitor in the final reel. (In this context, one might also note that *Mickey* also suffers from a high degree of generic uncertainty. Normand initially appears as a Pickfordesque waif, becomes a comically mischievous clown when she travels east to work as a maid, has a brief stint as an action heroine during a horse-race sequence, and winds up as the melodramatic damsel in distress at the film's end.) By far the most touching scene of *The Extra Girl*,

comes at the very end where a now grown-up (and romantically shot) Mabel, seemingly made beautiful by motherhood, screens footage of her old comedies with her daughter. The poignancy of this scene derives partly from the sense of a career ending, and partly from the distance between the sentimental Hollywood *dénouement* and Normand's own life: Normand suffered a miscarriage the same year (Sam Goldwyn was widely believed to be the father), while the success of *The Extra Girl* was marred by her involvement in a second shooting scandal (wherein her chauffeur defended her under oath with the immortal line, 'That woman, when sober, is the sweetest woman in the world' (qtd in Fussell, 1982, p. 195)). Indeed, at this, the lowest point in Normand's career, her films were actually banned in several states in a clear echo of the scandal associated with Arbuckle: clearly, for American society at large, the complexities connected to Normand's 'star' were similarly open to censure.

A kiss that explodes in a laugh

Were there other, more transgressive elements within Normand's comic persona? One could go back to the series of films she made for Vitagraph before Keystone in 1912, in which the studio attempted to create a comic persona for her in the form of 'Vitagraph Betty'. Sadly, little footage still survives, but pieced together from press releases and plot synopses, it appears that the central 'gag' is that Betty is shockingly 'fast' with her affections, her wandering hands and pouting lips searching butterfly-like for some passing man to land on. Needless to say, not everyone approved of the joke. The *New York Mirror* commended her performance but wished 'Betty had not been so free in her hugging and kissing and had been more refined and dainty'. One of the few surviving films, and her last as Vitagraph Betty, suggests why audiences may well have been scandalized: in *The Subduing of Mrs Nag* (1911) she is cast alongside John Bunny and Flora Finch, usually the most staid and conservative of comedy performers, their middleclass marriage the centre of mildly farcical misunderstandings rather than slapstick chaos. The presence of Mabel, however, somehow turns even these most unexcitable of performers strangely frisky: Bunny is soon reduced to chasing his secretary around the office and, to allay suspicion, Mabel is forced to dress up as a male stenographer (complete with fetching fake moustache), whereupon Mrs Nag becomes smitten, and falls for Mabel's charms as well. 'This film will give offence to many observers', writes one reviewer, and Vitagraph Betty was discreetly retired. But the role

suggests a more erotic dimension to Mabel's persona, not least through the clear suggestion in the film that Mabel is subtly, but seductively, leading the pair astray.

As Henry Jenkins notes, films such as this break up the patriarchal structure of male jester/female object/male audience, which Freud formulated as the essential basis of the risqué joke (Jenkins, 1992, p. 246). Moreover, the indeterminacy of Mabel's persona suggests early twentieth-century uncertainties regarding the notion of female performance and the presence of the female body. True, on stage there was an established tradition of bawdy female vaudevillians (Eva Tanguay and Fanny Brice, being the most famous). But film, with its voyeuristic close-ups, exaggerated movement and stress on both beauty and the grotesque, presented unique problems. The Gibson Girl, with her soft, rounded, valentine-card sentimentality; the diving girl with her sinuous but sinless physicality; the pastoral tomboy with her healthy vigour and rambunctiousness; the fast girl, whose allure is so strong it could only be coded as comic: these permissible models for female display could not yet be synthesized, but rather suggested the problems involved in trying to code the erotic as comic.[5]

A 1915 editorial in *Motion Picture Classic* avers that 'funny women' are 'an aberration of nature', perverting 'the natural respect and admiration that is due to the fairer sex' (qtd in King, 2009, p. 223). The notion of laughing at a woman is 'disrespectful', agrees an uncredited writer for *Motion Picture World* in the same year. 'Woman is rarely ridiculed in true comedy', the author writes. 'It does not please the better classes to see her held up to scorn' (qtd in King, 2009, p. 221). In an interview published the following year, Normand pointedly disagreed, the *New York Telegraph* arguing that 'it is quite as possible to laugh at a pretty woman as sigh for her' (qtd in King, 2009, p. 222). And yet, given the definitions of the feminine available to her, it is clear just how intransigent such assumptions would be.

It's true that women tend to come off badly in slapstick comedy; after all, disrupting the codes of genteel US, its manners, behaviour and morality (including the tendency to place womanhood on a pedestal), is the *raison d'être* of Sennett's movies. Slapstick comedy 'is basically masculine in gender and often anti-feminine in intention', claims Molly Haskell (Haskell, 1974, p. 61), an attack upon the spiritual, sentimental and domestic, historically feminine domains. Women could act as markers of these ideals, marking social acceptance and rehabilitation, but to actively disrupt such codes appears a 'desecration of her sex' and thus implicitly a step too far (Haskell, 1974, p. 62). Chaplin certainly

tends to position women as saint or shrew, and this is perhaps the reason why his early films with Normand seem to throw him off balance. In *Mabel's Married Life* (1914), when Chaplin comes home, she socks him with whatever is to her hand in their apartment – her iron, his pants, the ironing board – but after pounding Charlie to the floor, she starts to kiss and caress him. Chaplin looks confused, and well he might: what kind of role was Mabel playing anyway? Indeed, this uncertainty, rather than directorial incompetence, may well suggest the truth of Chaplin's reluctance to work with her.[6]

One of the other intractable problems associated with female comediennes was class. The Gibson Girl, for all that she was seen by Gibson as an American 'type', was inescapably of the leisure class; however, the beachfront settings and poolside scenarios favoured by Sennett for his 'bathing' films suggested overwhelmingly working-class amusements. True, the rise in female sports at the end of the nineteenth century was driven by increased participation in college games, including baseball and basketball alongside the more demure tennis and golf, but the social display of the beach remained off limits to the upper classes until well into the 1920s. There were other tensions too. Sport shifted the notion of female accomplishment from the spiritual to the physical, but this was still seen as dangerous to many in American society: the idea of being 'a sport' held strongly sexual overtones. Another fear was that too much physical activity would rob women of their femininity. A *New York Times* article in 1912 asked 'Are athletics a menace to motherhood?', the addition of a toned muscularity clear proof of 'mannishness'. Admittedly, only six years later the staidly conservative *Ladies Home Journal* was advising women to adopt a 'sporty' look in their fashion, but they still advocated caution when it came to actual participation: not jumping 'overly far' in the air, and always allowing young men to beat them (Kleinberg, 1999, p. 172).

The most intractable problem though was beauty. 'Wouldn't any woman rather be known for her beauty than her wit?' asked *Motion Picture World*. 'When woman's whole aim in life is to be attractive, how must it feel to play the buffoon?' (qtd in King, 2009, p. 234). The answer was *unwomanly,* suggestive of dubious female identity (according to letters in fan magazines, many early film goers believed that the big-boned Marie Dressler was really a man). The central gag about Dressler was that she lacked the 'appropriate' feminine characteristics, routinely cast as a lumbering Amazonian, a 'hulking and homely yokel, first pictured throwing a brick for her dog' (King, 2009, p. 124). Upon their first meeting in *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (1914), Mabel comments 'Who let

one of Ringting's Elephants out of the circus?' Dressler is laughable 'to the extent that she deviates from specific gender norms', thereby reinforcing that such grotesque transgression exists primarily to be mocked (King, 2009, p. 222). And yet, Normand's own character in *Tillie's Punctured Romance* is intriguingly out of focus in terms of femininity too. Is she villain or victim, con-woman or love interest? At moments, the film portrays her as the feminine 'norm' positioned alongside Dressler's grotesque, but at other times she embodies the urban 'fast girl' viewed negatively in relation to Dressler's bucolic innocence. Indeed, one of the striking things about Normand's filmography is the number of times she plays a con-woman, or jewel thief, or some kind of criminal or trickster. From Chaplin's partner in crime in *Tillie* to her final film, *Should Men Walk Home Alone?* (Leo McCarey), in 1927, this motif appears intermittently throughout Mabel's career: Mabel as bad girl, fraudster or cheat, in the words of Anita Loos, 'my favourite outlaw'. In both of these examples the good Mabel and bad Mabel seem hopelessly confused: one of the two poses is an act, but which one? In *Tillie,* Mabel initially helps Chaplin fleece Marie Dressler of her inheritance, but the film ends with a degree of female solidarity as both women tire of their two-timing suitor; crucially it's her friendship with Tillie rather than her viewing of the creaky melodrama 'A Thief's Fate' which ultimately reforms her.

One might also draw attention to the number of costume changes she goes through in the film (fashionable lady or scatter-brained maid?), Mabel seemingly able to swap class at will. In this, one could link Mabel's persona to the turn-of-the-century interest in disguise (masks, camouflage, abstraction), which Martha Banta sees as central to the art of the period (Banta, 1987, p. 221). This stress on uncertain visual signs, optical illusions, multiple planes, concealment through pattern and colour (Cubism was studied by the French military during the First World War as a method of hiding tanks and troops from attack), seems to link to a wider sense of uncertainty and disquiet, the arbitrary (rather than organic or divinely inspired) nature of all roles. Ultimately, therefore, this notion of role-playing, acting, playing out a series of male stereotypes, suggests that Normand's persona may have more in common with the notions of performativity discussed in the previous chapter than we might have guessed. Indeed, in many ways it is Mabel's very indeterminacy which is the source of her fascination, the suggestion that femininity evades and eludes the very definitions intended to contain it. Rather than a simple stepping-stone between the Gibson Girl and the flapper, Mabel embodies the impossibility of the female clown and paradoxically makes this her central joke. Her star image is unfixed,

over-determined and contradictory, a constant shuffling of the roles available to her.

Cherry bon-bons in a clown's cap

One may be tempted to link Normand to the figure of the female trickster, as identified by Lori Landy, with gender as a 'con-game', artificial to the core (Landy, 1998, p. 43). For Landy, trickster figures represent liminality, duality, subversion and irony, fluid figures appearing at what Foucault calls 'transfer points': moments when conflicting symbolic systems require the renegotiation of identity (Landy, 1998, p. 26). The dawn of mass culture and decline of genteel US, was precisely one such point, Landy argues, prompting a crisis of legitimization (the term comes from Habermas) whereby citizens were forced to re-orientate and redefine themselves less in terms of class or work than in terms of consumerism. What is perhaps less clear is whether the 'trickster' figures subvert this process or are simply by-products of cultural change. For Landy, the 'paradoxical' status of the female trickster (siren and child, beauty and rebel, consumer and object consumed) suggests certain forces which cannot be aligned in any other way; what seems less clear is whether social dissent is simply being funnelled into parody and impersonation, or whether something more genuinely progressive is going on. Tricksters assume 'a myriad of public personas', Landy claims, 'fluidly shifting between different impersonations as the situation dictates' (Landy, 1998, p. 11). Normand's ability to swap from child to beauty to battle-axe to genteel lady certainly fits this definition, but it also suggests a degree of control and autonomy over her career (and persona) which her biography doesn't always bear out.

After her break with Sennett and Keystone in 1915, Thomas Ince's publicity department announced 'no more slapstick, flour-barrel, custard pie, aeroplane, water-stuff for Mabel Normand, who is now to play dramatic roles' (qtd in Fussell, 1982, p. 91). When Mabel posed for *Who's Who in the Film World* the same year, she appeared splendidly regal in rich brocades and a plumed diadem; even when she returned to Sennett to make *Mickey* she was still photographed duck hunting and purchasing a Mercer roadster to add to her collection. Indeed, looking across the range of studio images from across her career, it's difficult to believe they belong to the same star: in a mocked-up baby carriage and rompers in 1916; in tomboy mode wrestling with a fake bear in 1917; or nude for *Photoplay* in 1918, wearing only a silver lamé turban. In a 1919 interview, she expresses her desire for more artistic and sophisticated roles,

before describing herself as 'a minx' who 'loves to pinch babies and twist their legs' (qtd in Fussell, 1982, p. 106).

This nebulous quality brings us back to the notion of 'woman as sign' and 'woman as generator of signs' as advanced by Lévi-Strauss. Whereas genteel ladies of the upper classes were overwhelmingly portrayed in culture in terms of masculine ownership and display (Edith Wharton's novels provide the best literary example of this), women in the early part of the twentieth century were led to view themselves as consumers, the very act central to the domestic unit. Of course, ownership and display are very much present in the early twentieth century (make up, once seen as linked to unwholesome professions such as prostitution and acting, became a major industry during this period). Nevertheless, one might argue that a new kind of female agency could be seen to be coming into being, as the woman was invited to view herself as consumer-in-chief. Of course, any notion of consumption as an active rather than passive activity throws up a number of contradictions – not least the notion that products can be sold as symbols of freedom and independence rather than mass persuasion – but it also suggests the means by which femininity could be recalibrated in a capitalist economy.

Was the sign 'woman' still central to patterns of exchange in the twentieth century? One can certainly argue that the stress on beauty, charm, sexuality, oral gratification, visual display and domestic fulfilment found in advertising would suggest so. Consumer culture, however, positions woman as both sign and exchanger of signs, a semantic slippage linked to wider cultural uncertainties regarding the 'new woman', that most hazy and uncertain of terms. Notions of slippage, indeterminacy and 'flow' have, of course, become central to much feminist theory, especially that of Julia Kristeva, who defines feminine poetics precisely in terms of language's materiality (the gestures, sounds and physical aspects of communication) and resistance to fixed meaning. For Kristeva, laughter in particular can be linked to what she terms 'the semiotic', connected as it is to certain rhythms of delivery and specific physical responses (the guffaw or involuntary titter). Hence Kristeva codes laughter and comedy as implicitly feminine, the disruption of the ordered communication of the father's tongue: the central taboo examined by Lévi-Strauss at the opening of this piece (Lechte, 1990, p. 129). As with Freud, the key term here is regression: the feminine aspects of language take us back to our early infancy, before words acquired meaning but were simply extensions of the mother's body, which is to say the timbre of her voice or the gestures of her physical presence. What

Kristeva terms the 'chora' is thus those elements of meaning which lie outside of the symbolic (try putting the act of eating a banana into words, for example). This is an indivisible aspect of all communication (employed by both men and women), but also suggests a kind of poetic resistance against fixed meaning, a 'revolutionary potential' (McAfee, 2004, p. 3). Bodily drives and energies are *discharged* through language, a discharge which can function to destabilize established meanings and conventions.

In this sense, Normand can be read as an 'unstable sign' in terms of the cultural exchange of her era, representative of a cultural change that was only to fully realise itself a decade later. Normand's best work comes before the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment (she was virtually retired by 1924 and died in 1927), and seems contained by its era in a different way to the light comediennes (Colleen Moore or Clara Bow, say) who would follow her.[7] Whether one reads this lack of unity as a disruption of the patriarchal code or the inability to synthesize consumerist patterns of behaviour with older definitions of femininity, remains open to question. In this sense, Mabel's inability to cohere into a single 'character' suggests both a chameleon-like shape-shifting and a willingness to echo conflicting cultural claims. Trickster or mirror, genteel Gibson Girl or working-class clown, sign or generator of signs? In terms of her cultural legacy such indeterminacy appears simultaneously as Normand's greatest blessing and her greatest curse. 'She was like a French-Irish girl, as gay as a wisp, and she was also Spanish-like and brooding,' claims Sennett. 'Mostly she was like a child who walks to the corner on a spring morning and meets Tom Sawyer with a scheme in his pocket' (qtd in Louvish, 2003, p. 46). Her final scrawled note reads 'This Thing is Appalling (Who Cares?)'.

6

Consumerism and Its Discontents: Harold Lloyd and the Anxieties of Capitalism

Any discussion of the transition from slapstick excess to narrative coherence and the subsequent sublimation of slapstick's anarchic tendencies inevitably leads one to Harold Lloyd, the archetypal boy next door, fresh-faced, neat, bespectacled – in Lloyd's words, 'a regular fellow', and certainly the least grotesque or transgressive of the great screen clowns.[1] The very normality of Lloyd's persona allows his movies to deploy romance not as farce but rather as the central engine of the narrative; you feel he *could* be a sweetheart, a husband, in ways that, say, Chaplin's Tramp or Arbuckle's man-child simply could not. Nor is this the only shift in the early history of slapstick; while Sennett's early movies appealed to the immigrant's view of the US as intrinsically violent and incomprehensible, Lloyd's movies reflected the concerns of his middleclass audience: getting out and moving on, the boundless optimism of upward mobility. The happy endings and sunny disposition of Lloyd's work have thus been read by a range of critics (including Frank Krutnik and Peter Krämer) as a genteel repression of the anarchic tendencies of slapstick comedy, their broad physicality kept beneath the surface until key moments in the narrative: the great set-pieces of Lloyd's work (Krutnik, 2003, pp. 43–54, 52–72).

Rather than Donald Crafton's notion of gags as 'narrative disruption' (as discussed in Chapter 2), 'situation comedy' maintains an 'underlying commitment to narrative values', which in turn reflect solid middleclass conventions of realism, propriety and reason, contravening the rules evoking *embarrassment* rather than liberation (King, 2009, p. 111). Although this shift from slapstick to situation is frequently linked to the move to features in the early 1920s, in fact it's not hard to find examples of genteel, decorous farces throughout the 1910s (from

the films of John Bunny discussed in the previous chapters to the rather insipid pairing of Bobby Vernon and a young Gloria Swanson in a series of romantic comedies turned out under the Sennett logo between 1916 and 1918). The move to features (and the changing class demographics of the cinema-going audience) simply privileged this strand above the discontinuous absurdism of the more robust, physically orientated shorts examined in Chapter 2. This 'subordination of violence', in Peter Krämer's words, represents the shift in comedy's status from a support for 'legitimate' dramas to its new status as the evening's main event (Slocum, 2001, p. 111); the will to violence (let's smash things up!) is thus disguised beneath a veil of narrative legitimacy, erupting only from time to time in the later features' stress on stunts and special effects.

For Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, Lloyd's features in particular represent the way in which slapstick energies, what Antonin Artuad called their 'hymn to anarchy and whole hearted revolt', are 'industrially and institutionally marginalised', the arbitrary or unmotivated displaced by the causal universe of classical Hollywood (Krutnik, 2003, pp. 2, 69). If, as Peter Krämer suggests, the drive of situation comedy is to 'educate, stabilize and integrate' the comic outsider in terms of both narrative and social order, then Lloyd appears as the most willing of participants, a yes-man whose films continually stress a bourgeois longing to obey, conform and belong (Krämer, 2003, p. 47).

Convincing as many of the above arguments are, however, I'm not so sure that this received wisdom is entirely true. Rather than conformist, I argue that Lloyd's films seem to express the problematic nature of Edward Bernays's ideas as set out in Chapter 1, namely the struggle to sublimate unconscious desire in socially acceptable consumption. As we have seen, desire in much early slapstick appears infantilized, turned into regression, so that the characters in their shorts appear as demonic children driven only by their own bodily needs and a voracious appetite for destruction. Desire in Lloyd's films proves much more problematic, as it is tied to the social rather than the personal. Ultimately, it is not so much that Lloyd's character *wants* to succeed, but rather that he *has* to.

Indeed, for all the talk of the normalcy of Lloyd's onscreen persona, his actions are driven by insecurity, anxiety and a kind of manic desperation. The psychic pressure now comes from the outside, but the end result is as irrational and chaotic as anything in Sennett's kingdom of misrule. In a sense, Lloyd's genius lies in reversing the polarities; Sennett's characters are anarchists disrupting an orderly world they do

not understand, while with Lloyd it is the world of order, the world of work and money which forces him to take the extreme actions he does. In this sense, the energies of the unconscious have simply shifted from the individual to the social.

The comedy of desperation

Perhaps unsurprisingly for a film maker indelibly associated with the positive, Lloyd titled his 1928 autobiography, *An American Comedy*, as the deliberate antithesis of Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925); his was to be an all-American success story: optimistic, affirmative, patriotic. Lloyd claims:

> I was average, and typical of the time and place. I might have been 'Master America' most any year between 1813 and 1910. This is assuming that the average boy before the war was moderately poor, that his folks moved around a great deal, and that he worked for his spending money at any job offered.
>
> (Cahn, 1966, p. 124)

Though hard up, in his book the young Lloyd prospers through a mixture of hard work, entrepreneurial flair and positive thinking; pretty soon he is the most popular boy in whatever school he arrives at, the best athlete, boxer or climber, a natural leader, dazzling his classmates with magic tricks, tall tales and extemporized routines. When Harold takes up a paper round, it is swiftly so profitable that he has to employ other children to take on extra routes; likewise his job hawking popcorn on station platforms magically becomes a state-wide enterprise, easily equalling his father's income. How could young Harold possibly fail? 'If you're short, grow – this is America!' he writes (Dardis, 1983, p. 7). For Lloyd, it seems that all one needs is pluck, confidence, verve; for an ambitious young man on the make, all avenues lie open.

However, such sentiments fail to mask an unspoken sense of anxiety and insecurity which undercuts Lloyd's sunny prose. Seemingly artlessly, Lloyd's biography juxtaposes his own youthful triumphs with his father's business failings, an unceasing catalogue of disasters which accounts for the Lloyd family's itinerant lifestyle during this period, the Lloyds drifting in ever decreasing circles through small towns across Nebraska and Colorado. His father, James Darsie Lloyd, worked as a door-to-door salesman selling cheap sewing machines and picking up

whatever piecemeal jobs he could find to make do. A convincing talker but a dreamy and impractical worker, 'Foxy' Lloyd's story is the opposite of young Harold's: for Lloyd Snr all business ventures fail, all stocks prove worthless, all horses come in last. By the time, his wife divorces him in 1910, Lloyd Snr seems to have tried and failed at every profession available in the small town American : restaurateur, hardware store owner, clerk in a shoe shop. Indeed, the only bout of good fortune came when he was run down by a brewery truck; with the generous compensation payment, father and son tossed a coin, and then arbitrarily decided to move west to California – Lloyd Snr to open a pool hall (within months it was closed) and Lloyd Jnr to try his luck in the movie business. Given this context, it is perhaps significant that the vicissitudes of luck, fate and chance continued to haunt Lloyd throughout his career. Intensely superstitious, he relied upon complicated rituals and actions (leaving every building only by the door he came in, driving around the fountain outside his palatial mansion at least once, avoiding unlucky streets, including the ones in which his mother and brother died) in order to ward off ill fortune. Like Henry Ford, terrified of being surprised by *Little Orphan Annie,* or Fredrick Winslow-Taylor, overwhelmed by irrational nightmares each night, Lloyd's success seemed predicated upon the imposition of an arbitrary sense of order in an otherwise chaotic world. In life, his personal foibles were well recorded; his refusal to accept bad news (the fake bomb which blew off his thumb and forefinger and nearly killed him in 1919 is never mentioned in his autobiography and afterwards he refused even to accept it had ever happened, despite having to wear a prosthetic glove), his desperate need to win all games or sports he played (even when playing against his own child!), his neurotic inability, despite his generally warm and kindly temperament, to accept set-backs or any degree of personal failure. Indeed, despite Lloyd's seemingly unstoppable rise to the top of his profession, Foxy's legacy of defeat and inadequacy echo throughout his movies. No fewer than three of Lloyd's 'glasses' shorts feature Harold contemplating suicide after the loss of either his girlfriend, job, or both; similarly, the critic Len Borger has drawn attention to just how much pain, physical, emotional and social, Harold's character has to go through before he is allowed to win through (Reilly, 1978, p. 183). In this sense, Harold's upward mobility is always qualified by his fear of falling, a metaphor which occurs again and again in his films.

Much has been written about the way in which Harold's screen persona embodies the spirit of the 1920s, his eager-beaver character's

complete identification with the aspirations of the time. While Chaplin's 'Everyman of the slums' distilled the essence of immigrant pride as well as the pathos of separation, Harold's glasses reflected back the hopes and fears of an overwhelmingly middleclass, profoundly bourgeois, audience – precisely the reason, of course, why iconoclastic critics like Gilbert Seldes disliked him so.[2] Harold seeks acceptance into the material world of a good job, a swell place, nice things, with a pretty girlfriend as the final seal of approval, a young man's reward for a sufficiently high income, well-developed personality and social conformity. Harold is a diligent organization man rather than a rebel; his eccentricity, such as it is, comes from an excess of orthodoxy, the fact that he has too much zeal, is too success-orientated, in a sense is just *too* driven. His very desperation to be like everyone else pushes his persona into parody; the simpering smile that tries to win people over, the zestful schemes to impress the boss, the manic energy that accompanies his attempt to climb the greasy pole. If Henri Bergson is right, and comedy is produced by an *excess* of something, then with Lloyd it is that he simply tries too hard, that his enormous energies are channelled into such conventional pursuits. The result is rather like a Magritte painting; after a while it is the bowler-hatted, soberly respectable businessmen who start to look a little odd, even surreal. Ironically it is Harold's very attempt to embody ordinariness that makes him stand out.

As Donald McCafferey has pointed out, Harold's apparent bashfulness – his shy advances, mild-mannered demeanour, his need to please – belies his frantic, even aggressive, drive to 'get on' (McCafferey, 1968, p. 56). Desperation makes him act in outlandish ways, but this extravagance in turn carries him further away from the norms of 'acceptable' behaviour. Harold working in an office is unnoticeable (Lloyd used to crow that he was the only major movie star who could walk down any street unmolested) but Harold racing to work in an ambulance in order to avoid being late, or clinging to the outside of a skyscraper in a publicity stunt, is comically, bizarrely out of place. It is not that his persona is 'deviant' or grotesque, but rather than this ordinary-looking young man should find himself in such a place under such circumstances – the very definition of situation comedy.

It is perhaps in this context that one should acknowledge Hal Roach's oft-quoted claim that Harold was not a comedian *per se,* but rather a talented straight actor *playing* one, the theme of impersonation and disguise running almost unconsciously throughout Lloyd's career (Vance, 1999, p. 19). In *An American Comedy,* Lloyd claims,

> even as a little boy, I was crazy about make-up. I remember how I would spend hours before the mirror making eyebrows and moustaches with charcoal or anything that would leave a mark on my small face. Then I experimented on all the boys in the neighborhood. We would dress up in all sorts of wild costumes and prance up and down the street.
>
> (Lloyd and Stout, 1928, p. 8)

His early friendship with the actor John Lane Connor seems based, at least in part, on a fascination with the putty noses, bizarre wigs and theatrical make up Connor employed, 'the practice of physical deception' virtually 'an obsession with Lloyd', according to his biographer, Tom Dardis (1983, p. 15). Indeed, the very first publicity shots Lloyd mailed out to the studios were of Lloyd disguised as old men, toothless idiots or exotic natives, and he made his onscreen debut as a Yaqui Indian (film historians have also spotted him (aside Hal Roach) as one of the three eunuchs in George Periolot's *Samson* (1916)). Moreover, the (probably apocryphal) story Lloyd tells of how he used to sneak himself through the studio gate by applying make up and disguising himself as an extra (a ruse which sounds suspiciously like the plot of one of his own films) places the idea of impersonation and impression at the very centre of his *oeuvre*. The plots of virtually all of his movies revolve around either Harold *pretending* to be someone he isn't (most obviously his boss in *Safety Last* (Fred Newmeyer/Sam Taylor, 1923), or else the idea of Harold playing a role that he is singularly ill equipped to pull off (such as a football hero in *The Freshman* (Fred Newmeyer/Sam Taylor, 1925) or a sophisticated lover in *Girl Shy* (Fred Newmeyer/Sam Taylor, 1924)).

In Lloyd's films, the idea of performance, of acting out a publicly prescribed persona, is accompanied by a fear of a failure, of being caught out and ridiculed. Hence the fact that embarrassment plays such a strong part in his films; it is precisely because Harold is so concerned with how he is seen by others, of performing for their benefit by impersonating an exaggerated version of normality, that he is terrified of exposure, of the discovery of his own inadequacy. Perhaps surprisingly, illusion and deception – camera tricks, the deliberate fooling of the audience, the sense that things are rarely as they appear – play as large a role in Lloyd's work as it does in Keaton's; if all the world is a social stage for Harold, then his real fear becomes not just fluffing his lines, but crossing that third wall that means being excluded from the world of appearances forever.

Figure 6.1 Patrick Youch and Harold Lloyd in *Safety Last* (Fred C. Newmeyer/Sam Taylor, 1923).
Source: Hal Roach Studios/Pathé.

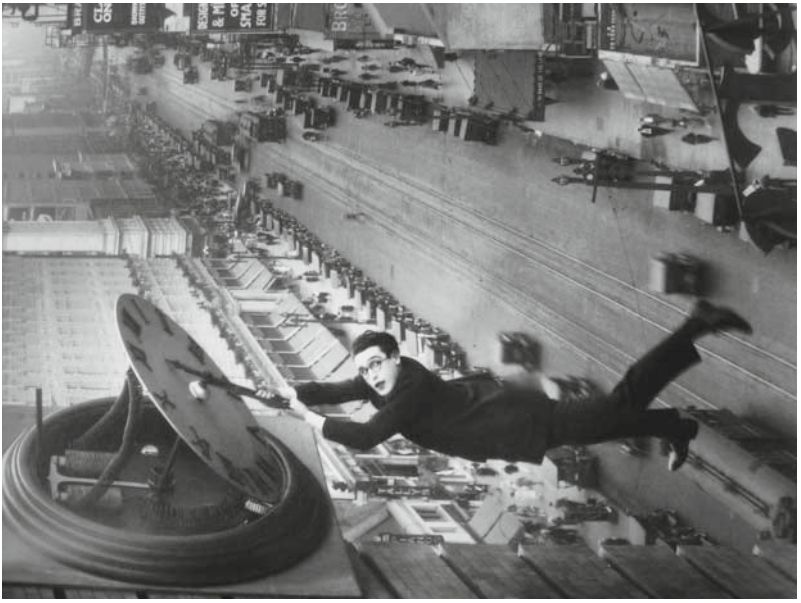

Figure 6.2 *Safety Last* (Fred C. Newmeyer/Sam Taylor, 1923).
Source: Hal Roach Studios/Pathé.

The omnipresent audience

Safety Last (Fred C. Newmeyer/Sam Taylor, 1923) begins with a distinctly off-colour visual joke in which we believe Harold has been taken to the gallows, when he is simply leaving town to travel to the big city. The implication that this is a one-way ticket is made clear by his girlfriend, Mildred, who tells him that 'Harold, it would break my heart if you failed . . . but I know I'll get nothing but good news from you'. As John Belton has noted, perhaps for the first time in Lloyd's *oeuvre* the hero's move to the big city feels like the entering of a trap, the promise of riches (and thus the girl; like Gatsby's Daisy, her materialism is never in doubt) merely the bait to lure him in (Reilly, 1978, p. 193). Two more visual gags built around deception follow: first Harold mistakes an ice wagon for his carriage, almost missing his train, and then he picks up a baby's travel cot rather than his own travelling bag. In both cases, Harold's poor powers of perception (suggested by both his glasses and his naivety) auger badly for his chances in the urban jungle; rather than the devil-may-care go-getter setting off to make good, Lloyd appears to be more like a lamb to the slaughter (Harold Lamb is his name in *The Freshman*), perhaps making one think of John Dos Passos's 1920 novel, *Manhattan Transfer,* the fleshy 'meat' of New York's populace processed like sausages in an abattoir.

What follows is a comedy built, like the first gag, around misapprehension, as Harold is forced to fake his success in order to fool his girlfriend back home into thinking him a social 'winner', a deception which becomes more problematic when she follows him to the city, worried that his wealth will lead to him being snapped up by some other voracious female (for all the talk of Lloyd reintroducing chivalry to the romantic comedy, his films can be as bracingly cynical as Sennett's). In reality, Harold finds only failure in New York, his initial optimism and energy swiftly transformed into anxiety and worry. Despite his best efforts, he is constantly late, afraid of letting people down, unable to get to the right place at the right time; in this sense, circumstances conspire to make even the simplest aspects of Harold's job (he works in the interestingly feminine role of a store clerk in the haberdashery department of a large store) a minefield of embarrassment and humiliation. His responses, as noted before, are comically exaggerated: pretending to be injured so as to catch an ambulance to work, disguising himself as a shop dummy in order to beat the security guard (and thus the time-clock), being hung up inside like a fur coat, all redolent of the idea of his reduction to an object among other objects. Faced with a malicious

environment and unbeatable odds, Harold's only recourse is to turn to deception and disguise, but this in turn ensnares him even more tightly within the nightmare logic of deceit.

When Harold's girlfriend comes to visit, he is immediately thrown into a blind panic (time and again in Lloyd's films, his actions seem a product of fear rather than desire), and conspires to pass himself off as the store's general manager, the position his girlfriend imagines him to fill. Once again the film draws attention to the idea of pretence, of playing roles; initially, Harold plays the meek clerk browbeaten by his domineering boss, but in order to fool Mildred he is forced to swap roles, exchanging a series of stereotypes and demeanours. In this sense, Harold's pantomime merely emphasises the extent to which all the employees are playing stock characters, conforming to a kind of social set direction; the hierarchy in the store is as dramaturgical as it is conventional, the handing out of parts arbitrary and unmotivated. However, the idea of adopting a role beyond one's range also runs the risk of discovery and exposure: whatever happens, one must not allow one's fancy dress to come loose.

The fact that Harold works in a department store stresses the role of consumerism in all of this, appearance and personality rooted in the social signifiers with which one both pays and displays.[3] We have already touched upon the outrageously misanthropic (not to say misogynistic) sales sequence in Chapter 1, wherein Harold's harassed store clerk has to literally fight off a crazed mob of desperate shoppers, casting the herd as a kind of inchoate mass, an undifferentiated ball of want and need, or great mass of flailing limbs and angry umbrellas. In the scrum, the normally gauche Harold is allowed punch and scrap as callously as Chaplin; the mob is ravenous, primitive, all consuming. Significantly, this portrayal of the negative crowd, a configuration straight out of Bernays, appears again at the end of the film, this time in the guise of the heartless rubberneckers who follow Harold's desperately slow progress along the outside of the increasingly threatening department store. Once again, the reason for Harold's bizarre predicament is rooted in his pretence; attempting to save his job by cooking up an elaborate publicity stunt (note how the film is rooted in the modern business practices of advertising and public relations) involving a 'human fly' (one of the many fads and crazes of a flighty decade) climbing to the very top of the store by a series of narrow ledges. Of course, a series of unfortunate events ensures that it is Harold himself, rather than his friend, who must attempt the ascent, as once again Harold's comic deception rebounds upon the deceiver.

What follows, one of the iconic scenes of silent cinema, feels like an anxiety dream rendered absurdly literal, the idea of social climbing (and fear of falling) translated into profoundly physical terms. The effect is at once comically surreal (what is such an ordinary-looking young man doing out there?) and, for a comedy, surprisingly disquieting: we feel that Lloyd actually *is* in danger, a concern that somehow extends beyond the frame of the film itself.[4] Certainly the effect on audiences of the time was electrifying, transposing anxiety and hysteria; 'they are tearing the arms off the chairs and laughing so loudly the organist can't hear himself play' notes one theatre manager in Oregon (Dardis, 1983, p. 117). As Walter Kerr has argued, fear and laughter are intimately linked; trepidation, he argues, will always seek an outlet in laughter, given the right cues (Kerr, 1980, p. 73). Laughter brings relief from anxiety, but the escalation of the absurdity – ever more dangerous situations, further for Harold to fall, a greater sense of peril – in turn ratchets up the tension, producing an extremely combustible emotional mixture. Moreover, the whole sequence is carefully calibrated, each moment of relief followed by the appearance of a new danger, every stunt accompanied by a slapstick exaggeration which then serves to alleviate the tension. One might think of Hitchcock's famous boast that his films play his audience's fears as a maestro plays the piano; agitation is balanced by the palliative release of laughter, genuine concern transmuted into the pleasurable frisson of deliverance. Interestingly, when Lloyd restaged the sequence for his 1930 talkie, *Feet First* (Clyde Bruckman), the audiences no longer laughed; his character's grunts of exertion, the scraping of his shoes on the brickwork, the sounds of traffic below, all conspired to make the scene far *too* realistic (and thus upsetting rather than funny), as if it were only the weightlessness of silence that kept Harold from falling to his doom. By way of contrast, the balance between fear and release in *Safety Last* is perfectly pitched, precisely attuned to the emotions of the audience. Lloyd vociferously supported the use of test screenings, editing his work and cutting or adding gags in accordance with the metronome of test audience's vocal responses; indeed, he even went so far as to use a mechanical device for measuring heart rate, the Laughograph, in order to maximize the number of thrills and gags. This willingness to please the crowd, an intuitive understanding of the desires of others, has been read as symbolic of Lloyd's essential conformity, his craving for acceptance rather than a true artist's Olympian disdain; however, as Hitchcock's quote suggests, the relationship between film maker and audience can also be more sadistic

than this. For figures like Bernays, the human fly sequence of *Safety Last* seems a textbook example of the way in which films can manipulate an audience's basic emotional drives; moreover, the sequence also seems to be *about* audiences and crowds in very intriguing and suggestive ways.

As Steven Jacobs has pointed out, high rise buildings can be seen as emblems of capitalism, rationalization and Taylorism, machines to live in, and in this context, one might think of their cage-like frames, speeding elevators, screens like windows (Jacobs, 2010, p. 153). Jacobs reads their use in silent film as a *vertical* version of the cinematic chase, each room or storey akin to a filmic scene, skyscrapers providing a ready-made form of spatial organization perfect for the stop/start rhythms of slapstick comedy's 'cinema of attractions' (Jacobs, 2010, p. 160). This stacking of discrete units links the sequence less to the narrative arc of situation comedy than the 'succession of frenzied action' of early comedy, the building as a discontinuous (albeit spatially linear) movie set, each floor a scene, each room a cut. As such, the department store in *Safety Last* perfectly amalgamates (Freud would say *condenses*) capitalism, consumerism and cinema, portraying what Louis Sullivan, in his seminal 1896 essay, 'The Tall Building Artistically Considered', proclaims as 'the new, the unexpected, the eloquent peroration of the most bold, most sinister, most forbidding conditions' (Jacobs, 2010, p. 163): which is to say, modernity itself.

In this sense, the absurdly inappropriate obstacles Harold encounters on every floor seem to chime with the anxieties and contradictions raised by Bernays's model set out in Chapter 1. While the savage dog (only just tethered by a rope) suggests the physical and primitive needs which must be repressed, the artist's board and photographer's studio (Harold mistakes a faked photo of a gun for the real thing) denote the means by which this sublimation is to be achieved, poised midway between threat (the artist's canvas spins sending him tumbling back outside) and salvation (the cop, a representation of the superego, in charge of the troublesome id, is waiting just outside the photographer's studio). Each of these ostensibly unmotivated bits of business derive their visual gags from Harold mistaking an image (a photograph or drawing board) for the real thing, a confusion foreshadowed by the camera tricks which opened the film. Indeed, each floor seems somehow to encapsulate some aspect of this new consumer culture: the tennis net that suggests leisure, the flag pole which denotes 'pole-sitting' (perhaps the most bizarre of all the short-lived crazes of the period), the workers who watch the stunt from their windows as

if gazing at a screen, enjoying the spectacle as a kind of extended advertisement.

I'd go so far as to argue that, rather than the iconic clock scene (a clear representation of the fear of becoming a salaried slave, tied to the system), the most interesting gags are those involving a pesky mouse which sends Harold spiralling into an impromptu dance (shades of Homer Morehouse, who danced himself to death after an 87-hour danceathon in 1924, but also those plummeting millionaires of popular myth at the end of the decade) and a flock of mangy pigeons, which distract, blind and confuse our hero, luring him towards ever more desperate mis-steps. The film cuts from scenes of the brainless pigeons pecking at popcorn, no less, to shots of the jeering, laughing and wholly heartless crowd egging Harold on down below. Indeed, the public, always watching, forcing him ever higher, is portrayed as negatively as the ravenous locusts of the salesroom scene, the unflattering double of the real audience sitting laughing in the movie theatre. Moreover, the sexual connotation of the scene (a young man forced to scale a phallic building in order to win the girl) simultaneously serves to turn the scene into a kind of prurient display, in which everything that is private or interior must be turned into a stunt, an image or a public act. If Freud is right and one should view capitalism in terms of the sublimation of the sexual impulse into social advancement (to get the girl, Harold must divert his energies into work), Bernays transplants this foreplay to an overtly public arena, a form of terrible, humiliating exposure. What should be on the inside is suddenly exposed on the out: what nightmare could be more familiar?

Moreover, Harold is aware of the eyes of his audience at all times. He carefully pastes his simpering smile over his grimace, tips his hat to them, acknowledges their presence, but the very fact that his physical exertion is public, is part of his embarrassment and anxiety. For Harold, the crowd or audience is omnipresent, every action a performance, his most intimate needs and wants somehow on display. The final threat to Harold (and in many ways the most dangerous one, the one that threatens to send him crashing down to the very bottom) is the revolving wind-speed gauge which he fails to spot because of catching sight of Mildred; interestingly it is the apparently coy and tender-hearted woman who is the source of his greatest misfortune, the reason for all his trials and tribulations, and indeed, the factor which got him there in the first place. But the gauge might suggest Harold's own internal guidance system, his sensitivity to how he appears before others, which is to say,

his willingness to conform to external signals and directions. In terms of American philosophy, Harold is plainly what David Reisman (the clear intellectual heir of Walter Lippmann) would term 'other directed', or responsive to the demands of others, desperately seeking their approval and acceptance. While both Chaplin and Keaton tend to struggle alone (Keaton's stunts in *College* (1927) are performed at night when the campus is silent), Lloyd's battles always take place within a public context, performed before the eyes of an expectant crowd. For Harold, the crowd is at once maliciously threatening and the source of his most urgent desire.

Figure 6.3 *The Freshman* (Fred C. Newmeyer/Sam Taylor, 1925).
Source: The Harold Lloyd Film Corporation, Pathé.

Figure 6.4 *The Freshman* (Fred C. Newmeyer/Sam Taylor, 1925).
Source: The Harold Lloyd Film Corporation, Pathé.

Big man on campus

Like *Safety Last, The Freshman* (Fred C. Newmeyer/Sam Taylor, 1925) also opens with a scene of deliberate misdirection. We first glimpse Harold as he seems to be leading a massed football crowd in an inspiring rowdy cheer; a cut away, however, reveals him to be alone in his bedroom practicing in front of the mirror, all dressed up in the college colours in preparation for his departure the next day. In Lloyd's films, even if the crowd is not physically present then it must at least be imagined, for his character's self worth, even his sense of selfhood, is a category either to

Figure 6.5 Harold Lloyd, Jobyna Ralston and Brooks Benedict in *The Freshman* (Fred C. Newmeyer/Sam Taylor, 1925).
Source: The Harold Lloyd Film Corporation, Pathé.

Figure 6.6 Harold Lloyd, Hazel Keener and Brooks Benedict in *The Freshman* (Fred C. Newmeyer/Sam Taylor, 1925).
Source: The Harold Lloyd Film Corporation, Pathé.

be bestowed or taken away by others. This mediated sense of identity is confirmed as Harold self-consciously copies the pose adopted by his hero, Lester Laurel, on the movie poster hanging in his room, and then eagerly scans the yearbook of Tate College (his destination in the morning) and the visage of football captain, Chester Trask; a superimposition shot displacing Chester's mug with his own, makes this notion explicit and sets up the essential dynamics of the narrative (Harold's longing to remake himself in the mould of another). Indeed, throughout the film, Harold's ego-ideal is repeatedly expressed through the medium of images; a later shot, for example, dissolves from a newspaper ad for a debonair evening suit to the scene of Harold buying the material, the raw material of his potential self purchased wholesale from the catalogues of consumer culture. His peculiar jig, catchphrases ('step right up and call me Speedy!'), fashion sense and gauche mannerisms, are all in a sense shop-bought, filtered through the college movies of his idol, the clichés of mass-circulation magazines and advertiser's copy. As before, Harold is seeking acceptance through impersonation, ironically seeking to become a 'character' on campus by subordinating his own self to that of an airbrushed publicity shot.

Indeed, the whole film is a self-conscious parody of the 'college' movie genre that was already a cliché in 1926 (ribbing in particular the 1921 Charles Ray vehicle, *Two Minutes to Go* (1921)), Harold's persona signalled as ludicrously shop-worn and (worse still) last season; the more desperate his attempt to conform, the more the campus crowd turn on him, cruelly mimicking his affectations, sniggering at his dress sense and ridiculing him at every opportunity. Harold, however, is slow to catch on. He reads their satirical imitation as the sincerest form of flattery, playing up to his mock role of 'Big Man on Campus', and naively inflating his persona to evermore cartoon-like proportions. Significantly, when a jeering article appears in the college newspaper, Harold sees his photograph in print but neglects to read the text; for him, the image is everything, the cut out silhouette he so desperately wants to fit.

Comedies of embarrassment are reliant upon a desperate need for acceptance, a need which is manifested by a morbid fear of social transgression; just as impersonation is always accompanied by the fear of exposure, so too is popular approval balanced by a fear of public humiliation and exclusion. These dynamics drive almost of all the gags in *The Freshman* in a manner which is wholly antithetical to Sennett's work; whereas Sennett revels in the breaking of taboos and upending of social niceties, Lloyd's film is the product of a more conformist age which knows that public excommunication is the most terrible fate of

all. Hence the terrible, at times excruciating, pathos of Harold's neediness; his repertoire of strained smiles, at once prissy and desperate, his awkward body language, 'head bent to one shoulder [. . .] mouth squared almost in pain', ingratiating handshake and manic, over-enthusiastic palliness (Kerr, 1980, p. 102). The greater his need for approval, the greater the fear of rejection, and this, despite his unflagging optimism and self-renewing energy, seems to be the key to Lloyd's great popularity, and the degree to which middleclass audiences identified with his character.

Indeed, this identification is so marked that several scenes in *The Freshman* are vastly more painful to watch than the stunt work of *Safety Last*, even though Harold's only fate is to tumble calamitously down the social ladder. The scene in which Harold is called upon to deliver an impromptu speech to the college assembly, for example, reads like a checklist of any performer's or public speaker's most paralysing fears: being unprepared, not knowing what to say, the idea of being suddenly faced by a jeering and unfriendly crowd. When the curtains suddenly open to unexpectedly reveal the (packed) college auditorium, Harold is caught out in an awkward and embarrassing pose, broken ukulele in one hand (suggestive of castration?), rogue kitten (suggestive of femininity?) in the other. Mortified, Harold seeks to hide the feline in his jumper, but as his stuttering speech drags on, its tail can be seen poking out from under his clothes in a most suggestive manner; this is exposure in the most literal and Freudian sense, Harold unmanned by his tiny tail peeping out for all to see. When Chaplin used a puppy's tail for the same gag in *A Dog's Life* (1919), the effect was merely knockabout fun; here, we feel the full force of Harold's public humiliation. Similarly, the 'Fall-Frolic' scene later in the film sadistically reproduces Harold's emotional mauling. On the night of the most prestigious ball of the academic year, Harold's suit is still not ready; with the stitching still not complete, his (tipsy) tailor agrees to accompany him to the dance, hiding in the background in case anything goes wrong. Needless to say, the suit soon starts to come apart, each tear and rip suggestive of the disintegration of Harold's shop-bought persona, and the revelation of his vulnerable, anxiety-ridden self, trembling beneath.[5] The excruciating comedy of the sequence is dependent upon Harold's desperate, but doomed, attempts to maintain his dignity and composure as everything falls away. Just as in *Safety Last*, as the tears in his suit widen, his smile gets steadily tighter and thinner, his hand gestures more effusive, every movement painfully self-conscious and awkward. When his trousers finally rip, Harold slinks lower and lower under his table, while his tailor

snuffles around trying to sew things back together, a comic portrait of how Freud sees the human ego, desperately attempting to stitch up the trappings of social convention to mask the contents of Harold's pants (one should also note the homophobic fear of one's classmates discovering a seedy old man under the table, footering away at one's crotch). Ultimately, of course, what Harold most dreads inevitably comes to pass: summoned to the dance floor, Harold's evening attire finally gives up the ghost and the whole ensemble falls to the ground before the eyes of all concerned, his girlfriend , his classmates, the entire faculty. Interestingly, Lloyd himself didn't want to lose his character's trousers, believing that such a crude routine had died off with Sennett; test audiences however overwhelmingly demanded it, thereby demonstrating the sadistic nature of the crowd, and the way in which it inevitably, bullyingly, turns on the weak. At the same time, however, the question of identification is a complex one here; we are at once the humiliated Harold and the malicious crowd, both victim and perpetrator. This in turn relates to the film's ambiguous message, its empathetic understanding of the need to fit in, while at the same time acknowledging the malignant nature of the mass.

Indeed, on one level the film is an explicit satire on conformism, mocking both the desperate need to be the same as everybody else, and the means by which mass culture tells us to do so. The homily at the heart of the movie is to 'be thyself', but in many ways this is as ironic as all those self-help manuals that argue that one shouldn't follow the advice of others. After all, the movie itself conforms to a strict series of clichés and conventions, most notably in the final football game when Harold's last-minute run, miraculously, impossibly, wins the game. Here the film most obviously models itself on other college sports movies, but at the same time comically exaggerates the scene, self-consciously foregrounding the way cinema cheats by distorting time (the last few seconds of the game are outrageously extended), motion (Harold magically speeds up) and, indeed, the very laws of physics, the climax a triumph of wish fulfilment over narrative logic. Significantly at the end of the film, as Harold is carried aloft on the shoulders of his adoring fans, we glimpse members of the crowd copying his mannerisms and his catchphrases ('Call me Speedy!'), thus reiterating the logic of the film, the drive to imitate. The film may mock the fickle admiration of the masses but it also revels in Harold's inauguration as college hero, and in this plays out a very American contradiction: the longing to be both part of the crowd, but also to stand out, to not only be a member but (ironically, through conformity) to be its brightest star. Is this truly

the way to be one's self? Although Harold gets what he wants at the end of the film (not just acceptance but lionization), Lloyd also questions the worth of this approbation: if the crowd is so negative, then at what price is acceptance?

This ambiguous relationship with the crowd/audience can also be seen in Chaplin's work – in the famous monkey scene in *The Circus* (1928), when the crowd roars with laughter as the Tramp struggles on the high-wire, or in Calvero's failed attempt to make the audience laugh in *Limelight* (1952), for example – but seems to run counter to our received idea of Lloyd the crowd-pleaser, Lloyd the company man. However, I would argue that it is with Lloyd that we find the richest and most expressive working out of the problems and contradictions of Bernays's model of sublimation, and the psychic pressures involved in the shifting of the irrational from the citizen to the consumer culture itself. Ultimately, Lloyd's films seem to suggest, the royal road to the unconscious works itself out not through the individual dreamer but the American dream itself. Indeed, in that sense, the consumerist world Bernays helped engineer is still with us, but so too, are its ironies and absurdities.

Figure 7.1 *Steamboat Bill Junior* (Charles Riesner/Buster Keaton, 1928).
Source: Joseph M. Schenck; Buster Keaton Productions/Associated First National Pictures.

7

Buster Keaton and the American South: The First Things and the Last

Of all the great silent film comedians, it is Buster Keaton who most completely inhabits and exemplifies the machine age. This is perhaps because, unlike other performers, Keaton repeatedly foregrounds the notion that the movie camera itself is a machine, one more device in an automated jungle of sprockets, cranks and motors. Certainly, no other comedian of the period seems so aware of the essentially mechanical nature of the medium, its specifically machine-made possibilities and absurdities; with its flattened space, accelerated tempo and discontinuous leaps in time and space, film acts as a kind of technological synonym for modernity, a modernity in which Keaton's poetic engineering and ingenious modes of transport appear wholly, indivisibly at home.

So why, then, do so many of his later features feel almost anachronistically nostalgic and melancholic, elegiac towards the buzz and the whir of nineteenth-century invention rather than the direction of twentieth-century progress? And why are so many of these features set in the American South, a South whose pre-modern mythos appears inimical to his own worldview? In both film and life, Keaton was fascinated by machines, technology and the function of things. Disinterested in religion, the notion of the South as the antithesis of secular, urbanized modernity would seem to mean little to him, and yet there is a kind of melancholy beauty attached to his portrayal of a vanishing past, a concern with what Freud calls '*Nachträglichkeit*', or what the French theorist Jean Laplanche terms 'afterwardness'. Indeed, Keaton's films seem drawn to both the first of things (the first locomotive, the first mechanized conflict, the harum-scarum world of early mechanization)

and to the last (the last paddle-steamer, the climax of the American Civil War, the end of a whole way of life), and central to this is Keaton's very personal understanding and appreciation of the medium of film itself.

But why the South? And why do so many of Keaton's 'Southern' films seem to contain such unmistakably autobiographical traces? After all, Keaton was born in Kansas in 1895 (the same year as film itself), and spent most of his extraordinary childhood as part of a travelling medicine show plying its trade between the Midwest and New York, only (and then relatively briefly) touring the South in 1907, when Keaton was already 12. Why, then, should the region be so central to so many of Keaton's films?

Certainly the South was important for Keaton, as it was for silent cinema as a whole, as a symbol of the past rather than as a specific geographical location (none of his features were actually shot in the South, for example). Keaton may have recreated his Southern settings – costumes, vehicles, architecture – as authentically as possible, but the emotional colouring was drawn from the various shabby, clapboard encampments he toured with his family during his starkly unconventional, vaudeville upbringing. The medicine shows of the day were made up of crude farces, magic shows and playlets (including extracts from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Harriet Beecher Stowe, 1852)), but their main source of revenue was to offer a series of stern lectures on public health, followed up by the sale of some quack miracle cure (in reality, hard liquor). Keaton's father was employed as a 'grotesque dancer' on the tour, the family act a mock-Irish take on old minstrel routines. By the time Buster had become an established part of the routine (around the age of five) the show was widely known as one of the most violent in the business; on stage, Keaton Jnr was billed as 'the human mop', and the comic business of each show revolved around some act of childish subordination followed by a knockabout fight with his father. The slapstick walked a fine line between physical comedy and child abuse, and the Gerry Society, set up to protect children from exploitation in the workplace, implacably pursued the family throughout Keaton's youth. Keaton Snr temporarily placated the authorities by telling them that Buster was in fact a midget (the act took place with the use of heavy make up, all family members, including Keaton's mother, splendid in bald pate and ginger beard) but when this deception proved too flimsy, the Keatons took to fleeing the theatre before the police could be called to investigate. Needless to say, such wiles could hardly go on forever. As the act became better

known, increasing pressure was brought to bare on the venues which booked them, and eventually, despite the fact that the family had made a great deal of money playing to packed vaudeville theatres in New York in 1906, the Gerry Society succeeded in forcing them out of the city, driving the act further and further away from their familiar haunts.

The family toured the Deep South for the first time in 1907, ushering in a period of steep decline and difficulty. The money swiftly ran out as the theatres willing to book the act became increasingly few and far between. Keaton, now aged twelve, was getting to be both an awful tall midget and an increasingly unwieldy weight for his father to toss around. Worse still, his father's drinking was now seriously damaging the family unit and the act, the violence starting to spill off the stage and into the domestic sphere. As his father's alcoholism grew unchecked, the act too became wilder and more dangerous. The precise timing and positioning demanded by the stunts were seriously compromised by bouts of heavy drinking, one misplaced kick to the neck leaving Keaton unconscious for over 18 hours. With the money gone, the audience disappearing and the venues ever more dismal and desolate ('tank towns' as they were known in the trade), the Keatons' Southern sojourn seemed to mark a serious downturn in the fortunes of the act, suggesting that the movement from childhood to adolescence was, for Buster, a particularly traumatic one. Can this transition be seen to underpin Buster's otherwise inexplicable concern with the South? Indeed, can one read his need to revisit the South in Freudian terms as an obsessive-compulsive return to a site of personal crisis? Although the South was by no means the end of the act, something had changed. Keaton was now too old, his parents' marriage too damaged, his father too drunk; when they moved to the West Coast in 1916, Buster suddenly spirited his mother and siblings away to Michigan, without even leaving his father a note. Despite the years of unhappiness preceding it, this break was not an easy one; Keaton clearly loved his father (who chased after his wife, and was briefly reconciled), continued to support him, and when he achieved fame in the movies gave him minor roles, placed him on the company payroll and dutifully refused to criticize or condemn his actions. His central role in Keaton's life is clear. The notion of a loved but feared father, the family unit as simultaneously threatening and protecting, an inheritance that cannot be shrugged off: all these autobiographical strains underpin Keaton's use of Southern motifs. In this sense, Southern imagery appears in many of Keaton's films as a way of dealing with the anxious

and traumatic movement from childhood to adolescence, seizing upon Griffith's use of a Southern paradigm as somehow signifying a loss of innocence, but deploying this imagery in a much more personal way. The Southern stress on patriarchy assisted him in this; even on stage, little Buster's acts of irrepressibly childish insubordination, drawn from a racially suspect but still potent minstrel tradition of disobedience and anarchy, played out a culturally specific struggle with authority, simultaneously endorsing patriarchal power ('Father hates to be rough' was the act's mock-sincere catchphrase) while sending up the father as an oafish buffoon. The wish here is to prove one's own proficiency, to simultaneously win the father's approval and somehow turn the tables. But as soon as the father is weakened, as soon as he becomes the one to be saved, something is irrevocably lost too, and at this juncture, there is no going back. When you're stronger than your father, something has changed.

As we shall see in *The General* (Clyde Bruckman/Buster Keaton, 1927) and *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (Charles F. Riesner/Buster Keaton, 1928), Southern imagery provided a ready-made paradigm through which Keaton could investigate very personal issues of patriarchy and patrimony; his narratives focused upon a central shift from infantile clumsiness to mature facility. In each of these films, Buster ultimately learns how to work the wayward devices of his machine-tooled world, and it is precisely this mastery (explicitly coded as masculine) that ultimately saves him. In the same way, it was technology that allowed Keaton to escape the shadow of his father, turning down lucrative vaudeville engagements in favour of the emerging medium of film. Keaton's father had no time for these gimmicky new machines; indeed, even while being kept afloat by his son's newfound wealth, he continued to take great pleasure in decrying the whole thing as a fad, a fake, a bubble just waiting to burst. In this sense, film proved Keaton's mastery over his father, and thereby contributed to his own founding myth: sneaking away to watch Nickelodeon shows, watching the film explainers hawk their wares in travelling fairs, sensing greatness in Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915). For Keaton, cinema's past – the Magic Lantern, Phantom Ride, Kinetoscope – was inexorably bound up with his own. Film's ability to repeat the past (but also to transcend it), to recreate a vanished world (but also to usher in the mechanical age which would eventually replace it), to see the last of things as if for the first time, suggest the raw materials of Keaton's Southern films. They also suggest, perhaps, some essential quality of silent film itself.

Figure 7.2 *The General* (Clyde Bruckman/Buster Keaton, 1927).
Source: Joseph M. Schenck; Buster Keaton Productions/Associated First National Pictures.

Figure 7.3 *The General* (Clyde Bruckman/Buster Keaton, 1927).
Source: Joseph M. Schenck; Buster Keaton Productions/Associated First National Pictures.

Figure 7.4 *The General* (Clyde Bruckman/Buster Keaton, 1927).
Source: Joseph M. Schenck; Buster Keaton Productions/Associated First National Pictures.

The lost reel

In many ways, it was the American South rather than the West, which furnished early American film with its images of the pre-modern and the pastoral, a rural past as yet untouched by the machine age. While we're accustomed to thinking of the taming of the west as the US's very own creation myth, bucolic scenes of the Old South were central to the iconography of early cinema, signifiers of a fast-retreating agrianism. Indeed, one could even suggest that the South stands for a kind of pre-history of American silent film, with Southern themes, settings and scenery dominating cinematic representations of the rural, from the origins of cinema all the way through to the release of *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915.[1]

The seemingly boundless appetite for Southern material at the turn of the century – plantation romances, Civil War tragedies, slave melodramas and minstrel skits – especially in the North (and this despite the fact that the Civil War was only 40 years in the past), and especially among urban, immigrant, audiences (for whom the War would seem to carry

little or no resonance at all), seems too striking to be simply attributable to racial tension. More importantly perhaps, the idea of the South as a fallen Eden, a rural past now lost forever, drew upon an inexhaustible reserve of homesickness and nostalgia crucial to the period.

After all, as Charles Musser has pointed out, it was less the *animation* of the moving image that originally fascinated early audiences, than the fact that such motion could be *reproduced* (Musser, 1990, p. 167). The arrival of the Lumière Brothers' 'train of shadows', as Maxim Gorky (1999, p. 11) puts it, may have caused initial consternation, but it was the subsequent replication of the event (There it is arriving in the station again! And just as before!) which drew forth warm applause and, eventually, wild cheering; suddenly, time could be regained, relived: moments were no longer lost, but preserved forever, retrieved through a kind of mechanical memory.[2] Small wonder, then, that so much nineteenth-century writing on cinema contains a strange supernatural flavour. The past (and the dead) live on, but in a soundless spectral realm, both awful (in the original sense of the word) and idealized, a focus of nostalgia and exile. But at the same time, one watches these moving pictures in order to move on, adjusting to the rhythm, perception and tempo of the machine age. There is one's homeland, living but inaccessible, concrete and yet remote; and there too are the old governances, feared, respected, not yet escaped.

Early films may have idealized the rural past, but by reproducing it as a spectral, inaccessible landscape, they simultaneously acknowledged its passing – for urban, immigrant audiences at least. For later generations, this model would be taken up by the western, and the specifically American theme of the closing of the frontier. But for early immigrant audiences, the South carried greater resonance, conflating the paternal and the pastoral, images of authority and images of freedom. And central to this, of course, was D.W. Griffith.

Between 1908 and 1912, Griffith made over 450 one- and two-reelers at Biograph, many of which ransacked Griffith's chief sources of inspiration: his father's tall tales of the Civil War, his mother's stern injunctions against urban vice and his Southern obsession with threatened feminine purity. By 1910 Griffith was spending part of every year filming near the sleepy hamlet of Hollywood in Southern California, a location that allowed Griffith full rein to express his pastoral vision. Beautifully shot by his cameraman, Billy Bitzer, suffused in hallowed light and composed in breathtaking deep-focus, these images remain heartbreakingly beautiful. Here one feels the presence of a landscape both documented for the very first time and yet already passing, time mysteriously out

of joint, so that the nascent technology is made to express a terrible nostalgia. We are seeing things for the first time and the last: a paradox which is somehow central to the experience of watching early film. It is important to stress that the South is present here as an *idea* (an idea of the US's rural past coupled with a sense of patriarchal authority) rather than as a specific place (much of *Birth of a Nation* (1915) was also shot in California), its spectre signifying the loss of the past; like earlier film explainers, Griffith reinterpreted the landscape, appropriating geography to stand in for memory and dream. Griffith's South was very much an invented country, an invention crafted from the tall tales told by *his* father, a father whose heroic past (in his telling, at least) differed starkly from his dirt-poor, inebriated present. It should however be stressed that Griffith's films weren't always idly sentimental (*A Corner in Wheat* (1909), e.g., dealt with rural poverty), nor were they always politically conservative (*The Rose of Kentucky* (1911), made just four years before *The Birth of a Nation* was an explicitly anti-Klan film) or even neo-luddite; after all, Griffith's technical innovations were part of the twentieth century even if his lyrical vision belonged to the nineteenth. But they did serve to establish a specific (and, in Griffth's hands, specifically Southern) paradigm for apprehending modernity, the stable landscape fragmented and accelerated by Griffith's violent editing, mobile vision and sudden shifts in time and space.

Keaton always credited Griffith and Arbuckle as his two greatest influences, and dated his interest in the possibilities of film directly to *The Birth of a Nation*: 'from then on I was sold', he claims in his autobiography (Meade, 1997, p. 53). And yet, Griffith is most often invoked in Keaton's films only to be ruthlessly parodied: *The Three Ages* (Buster Keaton/Eddie Cline, 1923) is a spoof of *Intolerance* (1916), while plantation romances are sent up in films as different as *The General* and *Spite-Marriage* (Edward Sedgewick, 1929). More importantly the three features set wholly in the South – *Our Hospitality* (Buster Keaton/Jack C. Blystone, 1923), *The General,* and *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (Charles F. Riesner/Buster Keaton, 1928) – employ Southern imagery and themes in profoundly different ways to Griffith's films.

In the broadest of terms, the beautifully composed Arcadia of Griffith's work can be seen as shorthand for a sense of divine order, the Southern Eden before the Fall, the Fall represented, of course, by the Civil War. In the prelapsian South, everything is in its right place: hierarchical, stable, innocent of the need for progress. It is the North which is responsible for the modern pollutants of technology, industrialization and secular cities; the South exists outside of time as a kind of eternal

ideal. But while Griffith's work configures nature as the literal fingerprints of God, Keaton's films portray the natural world as just another enormous machine, a vast organic engine prone both to over heating and breaking down – which is one of the reasons why there are so many storms, cyclones and floods in his work. Keaton's is a universe of things, impersonal, physical, a comic study of bodies in motion. Nature is simply another primed and waiting booby-trap, albeit one deserving of respect for its lethal ingenuity and explosive power.

The conflict between the wilderness and industrialization in Griffith's work is thus rendered moot in Keaton's. The steam train which hoves into view at the start of *The General* isn't trespassing but rather forms part of the landscape; it belongs, formally, in the picture. Keaton favours long and medium shots, photographed in deep focus so as to stress the integrity of the composition. Gag, set-up, people and objects are all kept in the frame, unifying background and foreground. Everything in the frame tends to be just that: a *thing*, indiscriminately subject to the same physical rules, manufacturing a kind of slapstick equation which allows one the space to both admire the set-up and to admire Keaton's working-out. There's a sense of distance and reserve about Keaton's films, both in terms of his essential persona, whose woebegone countenance never begs for our sympathy, and in terms of the formal organization of the gags.

Arrival of a train

Indeed, this perceived standoffishness and overt rejection of sentimentality was a problem for many in the audience at the time, and it seems particularly striking that *The General* (frequently cited by later critics as his finest film) attracted largely unfavourable notices at the time of its release. The *Herald Tribune* found it 'long and tedious', the *Daily Telegraph* judged it 'a pretty trite and stodgy piece of stagefare', while *Variety* argued that 'There isn't a single bit in the picture that begs a big howl' (Dardis, 1996, p. 144). But the most vitriolic attacks centred upon its depiction of the Civil War. *Life* magazine noted that 'Many of his gags are in gruesomely bad taste', the *New York Times* argued that in tackling the War, Buster had 'bitten off more than he could chew', and even the normally sycophantic *Photoplay* admitted that 'they're kidding everything now . . . Buster Keaton does spoof the civil war most uncivilly' (Dardis, 1996, p. 144). In this respect the most telling comment was made by Robert Sherwood who concluded, somewhat bitterly, that 'someone should have told Buster that it is difficult

to derive laughter from the sight of men being killed in battle' (Meade, 1997, p. 172).

Not that *The General* was, of course, silent film's first Civil War farce. Charles Ray had starred in *Hay Foot, Straw Foot* in 1919, and just months before *The General,* Clarence Badger had directed a very successful Civil War farce, *Hands Up!* with Raymond Griffith as a union soldier trying to keep the location of Lincoln's gold mine (!) safe from prying Southern eyes. But Keaton's comedy was both more sombre and more disturbing. Certainly, some gags sail close to the wind for audiences of the time (most obviously the scene where every soldier Keaton tries to speak to is inconveniently picked off by a Yankee sniper) while other scenes are at once more subtle and more strange, such as the beautifully framed gag in which Buster is so absorbed in chopping up logs for the engine's tender that he fails to notice that the battle behind him has turned and he is now in the middle of enemy territory. The juxtaposition between the innocent slapstick of the foreground and the vast tragedy unfolding behind his back suggests something of the flavour of the film, and also hints at something of its unexpected sadness. It also suggests a second factor which wrong-footed many of Keaton's critics: the film's surprisingly sober commitment to verisimilitude and historical authenticity.

Although nonplussed by its failure to find an audience, Keaton later named *The General* as his personal favourite among his pictures. Above all, it allowed him full licence to indulge his love of machinery and locomotion; he claims that 'Railroads are a great prop. You can do some awful wild things with railroads', suggestive of Orson Welles's famous comment that the set of *Citizen Kane* (1941) was 'the biggest electrical train set a boy ever had' (McPherson, 2004, p. 177). This enabled Keaton to construct a film in which form and content appeared perfectly complimentary, a piece of pure cinema in which space, setting and composition *were* the film. Moreover, the purity of these formal concerns – the orchestration of movement, the documentation of bodies in space – seemed to connect *The General* with the very origins of film itself. Thus, the arrival of the 'the General' at the start of the film recalls the Lumière Brothers' *Train Arriving at a Station* (1898), while the point-of-view shots from track and train recall the brief fad for Phantom Rides at the turn of the century. Indeed, in a sense, *The General* can be seen as a summary of early film, from the Lumières through *The Great Train Robbery* (Edwin S. Porter, 1903), echoed in several of the rail side set-ups, to Griffith's *Birth of a Nation,* and onwards to the climax of silent film (although previews of *The General* were screened in

1926, the film was released in the US in 1927, the same year as *The Jazz Singer*).

Indeed, the making of *The General* seemed in some way to bring Keaton back to his first encounter with the medium, tinkering with the internal workings of the movie camera on the set of Arbuckle's comedy shorts. Of all of his films, it best represents his mechanical inventiveness, his abiding love for *things*; as such, it can be seen as a film *about* film, about a certain innocence of perception, the discovery of film's first principles and the meaning of the medium. The film's fluid tracking shots, created by setting up moving cameras on parallel tracks outfitted with special shock absorbers and in accordance with a rigorous worked out-geometry, create a strangely flattened space made up of travelling frames which can be speeded up or slowed down – just like film itself. As Walter Kerr has brilliantly argued, Keaton's films call 'direct attention to the camera – to its lens, to its frame, to the flat screen on which its images would be projected' (Kerr, 1980, p. 130). In *The Goat* (Buster Keaton, 1921), Keaton's character seems to see the world two-dimensionally, mistaking a flat tyre sign for a real automobile because this is the way we (and the camera) see it. As Alex Clayton argues, the world is 'transfigured' by the camera's view, transformed into 'an intricate configuration of shape and movement' which makes sense only when viewed 'at one remove' by the camera's artificial gaze (Clayton, 2007, p. 52).

The blue and the grey

The General stands as Keaton's greatest film because its vision of the past is rooted in the idea of seeing things – of seeing *film* – as if for the first time. Moreover, it is also a film about childhood (or, more importantly, a film about becoming a man) in ways that are extremely suggestive. As in so many other American movies, war acts as the essential agency of maturity in the film, the experience of conflict responsible for transforming callow youth into manhood. Keaton, however, pushes this cliché to the point of self parody in the movie. Whenever Buster's character appears in the first section of the film, he is always inexplicably followed by a gaggle of children, whose presence gets in the way of both his job (a railroad engineer) and his wooing of Annabelle, his sentimental sweetheart. It is Annabelle who pushes him (quite literally) into joining up for the war, and who then refuses him when he fails to do so.

On a very explicit level, then, the film suggests that Buster must prove himself worthy of her love by demonstrating both his manhood and

maturity, and the way he must do this is by retrieving his stolen engine. All of this, of course, cries out for a Freudian reading. After all, Buster's big engine is taken away from him and the only way he can win the woman's love is by getting it back, a task requiring masculine strength, prowess and virility. Moreover, the film is full of phallic gags, including Buster's wonky sabre, his anxious comparing of swords with the Northern general at the film's end (Buster's is much shorter and he has trouble getting it out of his scabbard), to the last shot when he finally kisses his girlfriend and can't stop himself saluting. Such dollar-book Freud can also be applied to the film's props and settings (a race to make his engine go South!) with the tunnels, water spouts and recumbent or elevated railway signals, functioning, from this point of view at least, as a series of visual double-entendres. Similarly, the film is peppered with allusions to Keaton's lack of height (he appears by far the puniest of the men seeking to enlist), his inability to get his cannon to work (it either falls short or goes off unexpectedly), his general clumsiness and inadequacy. In this sense, *The General* can be read as a kind of masculine anxiety dream which can only be resolved through wish fulfilment; indeed, in many ways this accounts for the uncanny symmetry of the film. As Robert Knopf has pointed out, *The General* possesses a cast-iron structure in which Buster corrects and rectifies all his comic failings on the trip North during his return journey South (Knopf, 1999, pp. 88–91). In essence, everything about the second half of the film is a reversal of the first: whatever dastardly iniquities his enemies visit upon him on the outward leg (stealing his engine, dousing him with water, derailing the carriages) he does unto them on the return journey South. The dreamlike symmetry of this long comic palindrome is, of course, entirely in keeping with Freud's notions of wish fulfilment. Whatever mistakes he made are now magically undone: this time Buster gets it right. He proves himself partly through his enormous physical skills (the stunts, falls and leaps) and partly through his technical proficiency, his ability to get the machines to work for him. Thus, the acute masculine anxieties of the film are finally resolved; ultimately, it is Buster's mastery of his engine which allows him to express his maturity.

But for all this wish fulfilment, the film also makes it clear that Buster is on the losing side. Moreover, while the film painstakingly recreates the Old South, this act only reinforces the notion of a vanished world; Keaton's valentine to the machine world is situated at the very beginning of the mechanization of war, and thus hints at the horrors to come in the twentieth century. Ultimately, although the film is fascinated by

the first of things (Buster initially chases the train with 'The Gentleman's Hobby Horse', the first generally available bicycle, and then a primitive rail-rodder), including Keaton's own first encounter with film, the tone of the movie is surprisingly valedictory, nostalgic for something (the Old South, mechanical innocence, the bloom of youth) which simply doesn't exist anymore. And once again, the key connection in Keaton's Southern films seems to be between the past and childhood.

Southern discomfort

These essential elements are also present in Keaton's previous Southern film, *Our Hospitality*, made in 1923. Here, Keaton plays a foppish New Yorker, travelling south to claim his late father's inheritance. As in all of Keaton's Southern films, his character is initially ingenuous and unmanly, his pallid timidity contrasted with an implied patriarchal virility exhibited elsewhere. His arrival in the Deep South is (ahistorically) by means of the very first steam train, Stephenson's Rocket, and forms one of the strangest and most dreamlike scenes in all of Keaton's films: the tiny, almost toy-like train picks its way through a vast wilderness along a ridiculously convoluted and narrow single track, snaking its way past stones, bushes and mounds. In many ways, this scene seems straight out of Méliès's *Journey Across the Impossible* (1904) with its formally dressed passengers, improbable contraption and alien landscape. Moreover, like so many of Keaton's best gags, the scene is funny-peculiar rather than funny-hilarious; the passengers are too big for the carriages, the track flimsy enough to pick up and move, the fragile Victorian contraption wholly out of place among the overwhelming plenitude of its surroundings. One is reminded of the surrealist paintings of Paul Delvaux, or of Freud's essays on the dream work. As is so often the case with Keaton, the right thing is in the wrong place (think also of the cows which fill New York in *Go West* (Buster Keaton/Lex Neal, 1925)), or else the correct object is in position but proves oddly too small (such as the miniature cannon in *The Navigator* (Donald Crisp/Buster Keaton, 1924)), or there's simply too many of something (such as brides in *Seven Chances* (Buster Keaton, 1925) or cops in *Cops* (Buster Keaton, 1920)) for the scene to make sense.

In each case the logic is dreamlike, irrational and infantile, the fever dreams of a child who somehow feels the wrong size for the world (again, one might think of *The Navigator* and those diminutive figures traversing a vast deserted liner). The opening sequence of *Our Hospitality* also captures the strange mixture of the authentic and the absurd

which characterises Keaton's film-making. On the one hand, the original engine is fastidiously recreated (so much so that the producers of the film bequeathed it to the Smithsonian after filming was finished), but on the other hand, this construction is so bizarrely out of place that the overall effect is unmistakably surreal. Keaton was so fascinated (and amused) by the shape of Stephenson's chimney-like creation (Freud again?), that he moved the setting of his screenwriters' scenario back 30 years to accommodate it; once again, his interest seems with the first of something, the incipient (mechanical) moment.

In *Our Hospitality,* Willie McKay's late father's legacy is merely the McGuffin that drives the plot, but its presence connects the film to the later *Steamboat Bill Jr,* another Southern film concerned with patriarchal inheritance. Once again one is reminded of Freud's view that dreams are echoes of things left undone, memories (or fantasies) not yet finished with. In Freud's conception of the dream work, the past remains unachieved and incomplete, and it is this notion which in many ways underpins the role of the South in Keaton's films. Keaton's Southern films are set in a past which is both unattainable and yet unfinished, in need of tinkering, perfecting and completing. The driving imperative behind all of these films seems to be a sense of work left undone.

In *Steamboat Bill Jr,* Keaton is again an Eastern dandy forced to return home (in this case, to Mississippi) to face up to his inheritance. In this case, however, the father is still very much among the living, a rough and ready riverboat captain who expects his son to help with the family business of running the last, original and much dilapidated paddle steamer, the Stonewall Jackson. Much of the early comedy in the film revolves around the strained relationship between the coarse, down-to-earth father and the effete and otherworldly son. In the opening scene at the railway station (more trains, one notes) the father (Ernest Torrence) tries to guess which of the passengers might be his long estranged son, picking out the tallest, fittest and most manly ('I bet he's bigger n' me!' he crows); alas, when he finally runs into Buster he finds the beret-clad fop playing his ukulele and dancing a gig for an infant. Similarly, when Buster first disembarks, he searches for his father among the wealthy and the sophisticated; this comedy of misidentification is in many ways more painful than any of the slapstick which follows and sets up the emotional dynamic of the film: fear of the father, coupled with a desperate need for his approval. In many ways, then, the structure of the film follows the wish-fulfilment paradigm of *The General*. While Buster is initially inept, unable to pilot the ship and clumsily fouling up the simplest of tasks at every opportunity, the

plot once again revolves around the affirmation of his masculinity; in this case it is the son who rescues the father from drowning (shades of Collodi's *Pinocchio,* 1883), rectifies his earlier mistakes and eventually steers the boat to save the day. Once again this display of resolute manliness is rewarded by the gift of a girlfriend, but it is the father/son dynamic which is the central relationship here. When paternal approbation is finally bestowed, one senses the full degree of wish fulfilment at play here, and the enormous emotive power of its mechanisms.

Like much of Keaton's work, the film's astonishingly destructive and frenetic ending has a feverish, flu-like quality, which again suggests some kind of childhood malady. Keaton had originally wanted to end the film with an enormous flood which would have swept away the town and precipitated the film's final act, his inspiration coming from news reports of the terrible floods (the worst in the US's history) which had devastated the area in 1927. Keaton's lack of sensitivity here once again suggests that his identification with the South was by no means straightforward, or that he was particularly concerned with Southern sensibilities; nevertheless, he eventually agreed to alter the film's ending, so that it is a cyclone which blows the county jail (and his father) into the Mississippi and which casts the Steamboat perilously adrift. The cyclone sequence – perhaps the most celebrated in all of Keaton's *oeuvre* – is self-consciously presented as a kind of horribly real anxiety dream, wherein Buster wakes up in the hospital to see the roof fly off above his head, his bed becoming a kind of makeshift chariot propelling him into ever more dangerous situations. Once again, the dynamics of this dream appear essentially infantile, the fears of a child caught up in a world over which he has no control. Buildings disintegrate, trees fly through the air, and the child himself becomes a kind of plaything, the helpless prey of external vicissitude. This is a world that resists any kind of influence, a world both larger and yet more flimsy than the child could ever have imagined.

This sense of mortal nightmare reaches its peak when Buster seeks sanctuary from the winds inside what turns out to be a deserted theatre. Rather than simple comedy 'business', the gags here are deeply unsettling, involving a strangely sinister ventriloquist's dummy, false walls which confuse the distinction between inside and outside, ropes and trapdoors, the paraphernalia of illusion and deception. The world of the theatre is inherently unstable, rigged to collapse, ready to give way or mislead at every stage; once again the point of view is that of a child coming to grasp with the untrustworthy nature of the world for

the first time. Keaton peppers the sequence with explicit references to (undoubtedly apocryphal) events from his own childhood, his own family myth: being locked in a mannequin's case as a baby; the time he was almost crushed by a steamer trunk; blown out of the window by a twister on his third birthday. Small wonder, then, that Buster's visage is so solemn: this is the world as combination booby-trap, pitfall and snare. But at the same time, Keaton seems hopelessly beguiled by this aura of illusion, the mechanics of the phantasmagoria itself. Once again, the true subject of this sequence seems to be Keaton's relation to film itself: the Magic Lantern shows Keaton would have seen as a young child, his time on the road with Harry Houdini, and the ambiguous distinction between hair-raising physical skill and artfully deployed illusion which would later prove central to Keaton's own practices as a film-maker. We are once again back at the very dawn of film and the mechanisms of illusion and disavowal which define it: film as magic, spectacle, sleight-of-hand.

But in Keaton's Southern films, the first things are always accompanied by the last. The theatre is demolished in the cyclone. The dilapidated one-horse town, cut off from modernity, also belongs to a fast-receding past. Buster's father in the film runs the last authentic steam boat, but its survival is threatened by new, more efficient vessels, owned by corporate interests; J.J. King, the villain of the piece, also owns the bank and most of the town's stores, and has all of the town's money.

The age of the lone entrepreneur is passing, superseded by a less impersonal, more ruthless system in thrall to the pitiless logic of hard capital. Keaton had good reason to take such notions personally; *Steamboat Bill Jr* would be his last independent feature, and thereafter he would be swallowed up by the factory system of MGM, his career as a film-maker (rather than simply a comedian) effectively over. Keaton thus evoked the origins of film even as his own contribution came to a premature and melancholy end. The vanishing world of the movie was this time his own.

Ghosts of the Civil War

Early film's status as document, as a form of mechanical memory, suggests an implicit connection between the image and time past, what Freud terms 'transience'. For Freud, transience is defined in terms of a feeling of sorrow in the present for a loss that will be experienced in the future; in essence, this can be characterized as the melancholy realization of the inevitable passing away of things, every film-still acting as

a kind of *memento mori* indicating what is now extinct, what can never occur again – except through a process of technological repetition.[3]

At this stage we might remember those early audiences cheering every new screening of simple things: waves on a shore, feeding a baby, the arrival of a train. Here was a sliver of time saved, protected, plucked from the endless void of forgetting. With each repeated screening the image seemed to transcend the banality of the original moment, acquiring new meanings and values, a new iconic status. The event – baby, train, foreshore and all – had been transformed.

The French theorist Jean Laplanche terms this 'afterwardness': 'the process by which deferred meaning and affect are activated only by a second (or third, fourth, or fifth) occurrence of a meaningful effect' (Downing, 2004, p. 91). However, Laplanche also applies a melancholy coda to this: 'the retrospective activation of meaning, he writes, is also an assumption of loss, since the presence of the second object announces the disappearance of the original' (Downing, 2004, p. 91). We are left with shadows, ghosts, spectres: the very presence of these flickering shapes signifying the terrible absence of the original.

In this sense, therefore, film plays havoc with our sense of time. As Walter Kerr has pointed out, all events on film occur in the present tense, the essential nature of moving pictures meaning that the events are happening right now, before our very eyes (Kerr, 1980, p. 15). While still photographs memorialize the past, the animation of these stills makes every scene an eternal *now*: even flashbacks, memories or historical events. As Roland Barthes famously phrased this paradox, 'He is dead and he is going to die'. In film, notions of absence and presence become confused; figures are mysteriously saved from the grave and yet simultaneously erased, transformed into another order of being entirely.

Laplanche's theory can also be applied to cultural memory, and more specifically to the myth of the Old South. As Jim Cullen has argued, what we might term the mythic idea of the South, the popular images, connotations and stereotypes conjured up by the term, only emerged in any kind of unified or homogenous form, *after* the Civil War, which is to say, after its ostensible extinction or passing (Cullen, 1995, p. 8). Prior to this point, the Southern states still appeared in terms of disparate regions, differentiated by issues of class (the aristocratic plantation myth being very different to the populist model of robust Southern individualism and lawless self-reliance, for example), geography and of course the ever divisive issues of race and ethnicity. The creation of a recognizably coherent Southern myth was thus only made possible by the creation of a new mass, popular culture (initially in terms of the press, but later

in terms of movie images, advertisements and, crucially, musical forms) and by the intense emotional need, after the Civil War, to define the region in terms of vital opposition to the colonizing modernity of the North. As Richard Gray has noted, this self-conscious reinvention of the past, and the reassertion of established regional codes was itself profoundly self-dramatizing, primarily concerned with *performance* rather than history (Gray, 1986, p. 76). Indeed, Gray argues that Southern culture is innately predisposed towards the theatrical and the exaggerated, artifice and display rather than authenticity or realism: or as Gray puts it, the Old South was dead, but its costumes and props still existed, awaiting a new script to once more put them into play (Gray, 1986, p. 180). But for all the vivacity of this spectacle, the earnest attempt of a region to live up to its mediated image, a mournful note still sounds; after all, the performance exists *in the place of* the Old South, indeed, in a sense, marks its passing. The myth is at once more meaningful than the original – as Laplanche notes, it is the second coming of something that activates its emotional resonance – but is also played out upon the grave of the original.

As well as the first mechanized war, the 'war between the states' was the first photographed conflict, a medium that is central to the US's cultural memory of the conflict, a collective memory framed by Mathew Brady's lens. Indeed, one might argue that the need to animate these still pictures, to return (in a Freudian sense) to a trauma left unresolved or a task undone, underpins early film's fascination with the South and time.

William Faulkner's famous quote assertion that 'The past is never dead. It's not even past' thus acquires a new *cinematic* meaning (Gray, 1986, p. 180). Images of the past are occurring in the here and now, but separate from us, isolated, cut off, as distinct from us as this world and the next. In early film, the South acted as shorthand for a rural, even pastoral vision, which could be easily appropriated by immigrants who knew nothing of the region, or of its history. Moreover, its stress upon patriarchal authority – the chivalrous paternalism of the plantation owner, the fierce masculinity of the irascible Southerner – provided a model which allowed audiences to negotiate seemingly irreconcilable tensions between nostalgia and the need to formally break with the past, a way of confronting the stern paterfamilias whose legacy must be overcome in order to achieve one's own maturity.

But what do we feel when we watch a silent film today? On the one hand the images feel incredibly *young,* with film-makers working out the possibilities of the medium for the very first time. The cities seem so empty, the landscapes still untouched; we are unquestionably at the

beginning of something ('the first of something is always mysteriously beautiful' claims Gilbert Adair (1995, p. 2)), virgin images innocent of an age of total mediation, the media glut and glare. On the other hand, however, the images appear incredibly, ineffably *old*: soundless, immaterial, deathly. Of all of the great *autuers* of the dead language of silent film, Keaton seems to have understood this duality most clearly. Here was the moving world, seen for the very first time. But as soon as the camera had captured it, it would never be the same again.

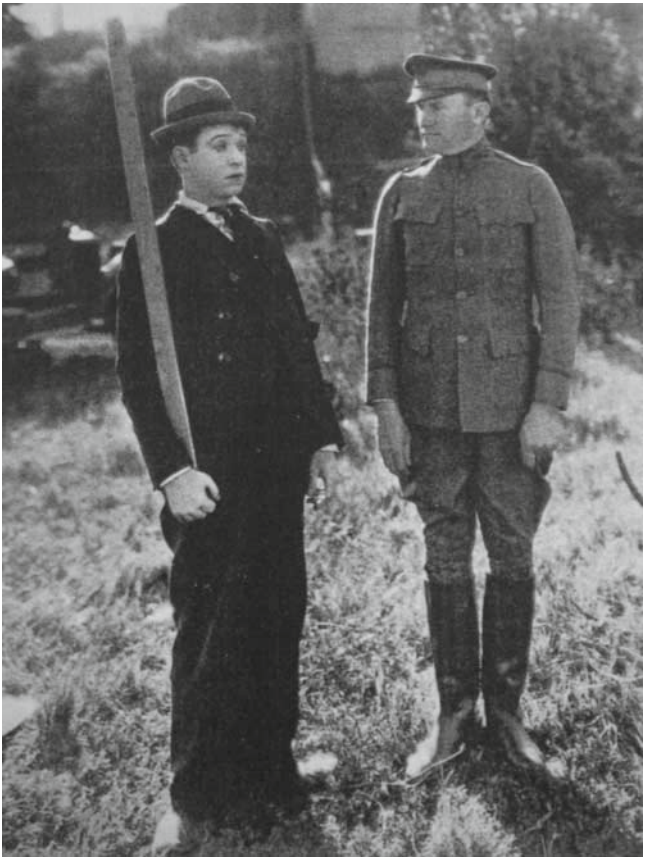

Figure 8.1 Harry Langdon and Jack Pratt in *Heart Trouble* (Harry Langdon, 1928).
Source: Harry Langdon Corporation/First National.

8

The Shell-Shocked Silents: Langdon, Repetition-Compulsion and the First World War

In many ways the idea of a silent war film seems no less absurd than the idea of a silent musical or soundless opera (though these too paradoxically exist), a kind of oxymoronic curiosity destined to be confined to the most obscure corner of film history. After all, surely any attempt to authentically represent the experience of modern warfare – the shelling, the gunfire, its terrifying suddenness and explosive power – has to take into account war's aural dimension, the constant ricochets and volleys, the sheer deafening loudness of each bombardment and attack. Rendered mute, something strange happens: the battlefield becomes somehow less physical and more deathly, a spectral no man's land, dematerialized and weightless. Though musical cues attempt to compensate for this loss (drumbeats for cannon fire, cymbals for detonation, whistles and plucked bows for passing bullets) the effect remains stubbornly non-diegetic, insufficiently synchronized to the melee on screen. Bodies fall, but we don't *feel* them. Mud sticks to everything, but it seems painted on, lacking any sense of clammy palpability. Buildings collapse, but they lack bulk or mass; rather, it is as if everything is happening in a dream, the soldiers weary sleepwalkers miming manoeuvres, the landscape composed of smoke and fog, as miasmic and insubstantial as a gas attack. Or perhaps it is that everything has already come to pass and this is merely some kind of awful afterlife, timeless and uncanny. As suggested in the previous chapter, film always exists in the present tense; even in flashbacks or fantasy sequences the filmic moment constitutes an eternal *now*. The silent war film feels oddly retrospective, however, a trace of something once keenly fought, a phantom battle like an amputee's phantom limb. One might

compare its status to the ghost-marks sought out by military historians, the scars and furrows of earthen defences now hidden deep below ground and therefore inaccessible except to infrared cameras, a kind of x-ray of battles past; one might also reflect on the fact that early x-ray films were exhibited by itinerant showmen as early horror films, the supernatural re-animation of the dead. Certainly our chronological distance from the First World War and the conflict's melancholy aura of tragic senselessness plays a role in this, but even so, there is a striking strangeness about the idea of a mute battlefield, a strangeness rooted in the very idea of a *silent* film. All quiet on the western front indeed.

In all of this, one might be reminded of Jean Laplanche's concept of *afterwardness*, as advanced in the previous chapter. As we have seen, Laplanche defines this concept as the process by which deferred meanings or affects are activated only by a second occurrence of a meaningful event; however, he then adds the melancholy addendum that this retrospective activation of meaning is also an assumption of loss, since the presence of the second object simultaneously announces the disappearance of the original.[1] This idea, which Laplanche traces from Freud's 1914 essay, 'Remembering, Repeating and Working Through', is central to the essential processes of memory; in his essay Freud argues that although sensory impressions press upon us incessantly, they only come to mean something, only become *memories*, through repetition (Freud, 2003, pp. 34–48). Meaning is always bestowed retrospectively and the perpetuation of this meaning is likewise based upon continuing mental repetition, although in this, phantasy plays as large a role (what we would have liked to have happened, or conversely a repression of what actually did) as the original event itself. This idea is central to the whole process of psychoanalysis. As Freud notes in his essay, vitally important experiences occur at a very early stage of childhood, experienced at the time without understanding, but which are then subsequently understood and interpreted precisely through their repetition in the therapeutic process (Freud, 2003, p. 36). These original feelings, of desire, anxiety, loss or love, are pre-linguistic and inaccessible; what remains, like the ghost-marks of past conflicts, is the chain of repetition, the retrospective meanings later applied by the psyche. However, as both Laplanche and Freud mournfully admit, this compulsion to repeat also makes obvious the fact that the original feeling, the original moment, has now passed; thus, even as the act of remembering installs meaning, it simultaneously signifies the absence of the primary impulse. After all, when you remember something, by definition, it is

already over. By the same token, only the remembered moment makes us mourn its loss.

This idea, the notion that the very process that inscribes meaning (a meaning which is always *après coup*) makes us aware of our unshakable sense of loss, has profound implications for the filmic process, indeed, our very idea of film. As suggested in Chapter 7, early audiences were enthralled less by the idea of the *animation* of the image than by the idea of *repetition*. There was the Lumière Brothers' train arriving at the station; then with a flick of a switch, there it was again, and again, always the same, always identical, saved from the fate of the ephemeral and passing. Little wonder then that one popular version of *Train Arriving in a Station* (1895) was a 'trick' version in which the train pulled in, released its passengers, and then ran backwards, swallowing them up and retreating to the very corner of the screen before returning once more, an eternal palindrome, endlessly re-playable. And yet watching it today, we realise that all these prosperous commuters, their long, drooping moustaches, bustling petticoats, elaborate hats and parasols, are long gone, along with the nineteenth-century bourgeois world which they represent. In a sense, the very presence of these flickering shapes signifies the melancholy absence of the original; the camera has bestowed meaning upon the arrival of a long-forgotten train in an unimportant station, but this meaning also creates a sense of forfeiture, even bereavement. The *now* of animation has been displaced by an overwhelming sense of time past. In a sense, film conflates notions of presence and absence: the eternal present of the cinematic process is also a kind of ghost image of what has already vanished, never to return again. And of course this is especially true for silent film, whose age and unfamiliarity render it a kind of historical artefact in a dead language, irrespective of its subject matter.

What if we apply this notion to our cultural memory of the First World War? Of all the important film-makers of the day, only D.W. Griffith was allowed access to the front, but even the footage shot by 'the Master' was deemed deeply disappointing, his hand-cranked cameras lacking the telescopic sights necessary to pick up specific figures or even distant explosions. The only answer was to re-stage the war back in Britain (the subsequent film was partly funded by the War Office Committee of the Ministry of Information) with Salisbury Plain standing in for the Belgian killing fields. While the allied forces were desperately short of shells at the real front, they were deployed on film with profligate abandon. Even so, and despite the imposition of wildly melodramatic scenes, Griffith still felt dismayed by the results.

'Viewed as drama, the war is a disappointment', he notes. 'The dash and thrill of wars of other days is missing'.[2] The stasis and torpor of the trenches, punctuated by aimless slaughter, militated against the animated battle scenes that Griffith had pioneered in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916). Moreover, the 'great victory' that Griffith had been commissioned to dramatize, was the Battle of the Somme, in many ways a disastrous miscalculation, signalling the beginning of the terrible deadlock which would come to define the stalled nature of trench warfare. Rather than inspiring patriotic sentiments or gallant acts of heroism, Griffith saw the footage as 'a terrible display of death', a training ground for the dead; the soldiers pretending to be casualties on Salisbury Plain would soon be facing the mass slaughter of the killing fields for real. Still lacking a coherent narrative, Griffith travelled with a small crew to France and shot a number of scenes only miles from the site of actual shelling – indeed, Lillian Gish blamed the shoot for the early death of her mother, who had travelled to France to 'protect' her daughters, but who later exhibited symptoms of secondary shell-shock, brought on, Gish believed, by her proximity to the explosions (Henderson, 1972, p. 185). While scouting for locations, Griffith and his military escorts came under direct fire; two members of the party were killed and, while retreating, Griffith witnessed a group of allied soldiers obliterated by shellfire close-at-hand (Henderson, 1972, p. 185). Thereafter, the crew moved back to California, where a ruined French town was constructed on the site of the set of *Intolerance*; a familiar plot concerning the fortunes of an innocent family ravaged by war was quickly fleshed out, and the finished film, *Hearts of the World* (1918), went on to become a financial success, though issues of censorship soured any sense of personal triumph for the director: Griffith was forced to cut (much to his chagrin) scenes of German atrocities in a bowdlerized 'peace' version, screened after the armistice. His publicity department, meanwhile, deliberately played up the confusion over any distinction between staged and actual footage, a factor further complicated by the inclusion of 'found' German footage – actually German publicity material impounded by the US Government. Film historians now accept, though, that very few shots actually filmed by Griffith in France or Belgium eventually made it into the completed film and that despite the advertising copy, no real scene of combat was ever shot. Nevertheless, most contemporary reviews (most vociferously *The New York Times*) praised the film for its impressive realism: 'sometimes one does not know whether what he is seeing is a real war or screen

make believe', one correspondent writes (Henderson, 1972, p. 186). For his own part, however, Griffith seemed uncharacteristically modest. 'The flickering shadows on the screen', he tells an audience in California, represent the war 'in only a very small way' (Henderson, 1972, p. 188). Rather than the elaborately staged (but historically bogus) scenes of the Somme, the most memorable sequence in the film is the scene where Lillian Gish, traumatized by the death of her (onscreen) mother, wanders wraith-like among the bodies and ruins of her devastated town, her fragile pallor never more deathly or spectral, the embodiment of 'the terrible display of death', which overwhelms the propagandist aims of the film (at least from our twenty-first-century perspective). One might also add that she is the embodiment of shell-shocked silence.

The silent arena

Walter Kerr has argued that silence elevates the image to the status of iconography and myth, transforming the particular (a war, a battle, a victim) into the universal (the war, the battle, the victim); similarly, silence dematerializes physical matter, the hand-cranked cameras transcending gravity and bulk to create a kind of telescoped grace, faster, lighter, less weighed down by the real (Kerr, 1980, p. 35). But such semi-divine separation from the quotidian could also disturb; indeed, the absence of sound can be sensed as a paradoxical presence, a negative element persisting alongside silent film's concern with essence and the essential.

Certainly, if one compares King Vidor's silent anti-war tract *The Big Parade* (1925) with the sound version of Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front,* released just five years later, one is struck by the uncanny, even supernatural aura which attends Vidor's battle sequences, their disorientating sense of otherworldliness. The external scenes of *All Quiet on the Western Front* were also shot silently, with sound effects applied later via the newly minted process of post-synchronization. One unexpected result of this is that one becomes keenly aware of the aural dimension of the film (in the early sequences, boots marching, crowds cheering, bands playing, later the whistle of shells, the roar of explosions, the screams and the yells) and also the way in which this soundtrack *grounds* the conflict in tangible, substantial matter: the thick slurp of mud, the thud of bodies, the crash of falling masonry. Indeed, there is a curious mismatch between the slightly accelerated

tempo of the scenes shot silently (the figures still drift rather than advance, seeming at times to float out of their trenches) and the sluggish weight of the static studio-shots; sound makes the air congeal and harden, restores bulk and difficulty. Suddenly, trenches become steep and slippery, mud treacherous, rubble difficult to clamber over; the silence of Vidor's battles takes place upon a different plane entirely, a plane closer to some kind of timeless Valhalla than the actual front. In *The Big Parade*, Vidor's use of superimposition makes the conflict strangely spectral, ghostly silhouettes flickering across an indeterminate horizon, conflating what is happening now with what has happened before. Figures appear and disappear in a hallucinatory daze, explosions signalled by plumes of smoke rather than by any ostensible sound; here, bullets hit without any warning and nobody notices his comrade fall. Indeed, the soldiers shuffle somnambulistically forward as if hypnotized or somehow possessed. No one stops, hides, seeks cover or pauses to tend to a fallen friend: it is as if the dead-eyed infantrymen are deaf also. The soldiers don't flinch, yell, or curse; rather they fall away silently, there one minute and gone the next, presence and absence at the same time.

This effect is most striking manifested in the justifiably famous 'March through Belleau Wood' sequence, which Vidor later described as an attempt to create 'silent music [...] a kind of a ballet of death'. In his autobiography, *A Tree is a Tree,* Vidor recalls:

> The thought struck me that if I could create a slow measured cadence as my American troops approached the front line, I could illustrate the proximity of death with a telling and powerful effect... I took a metronome into the projection room and set the tempo... Then, when we filmed the march through the Belleau wood in a small forest near LA, I used the same metronome, this time with a drummer whose bass drum amplified the metronomic ticks, so that all in range of several hundred yards could hear. I instructed the men that each step must be taken on a drum beat, each turn of the head, lift of a rifle, pull of a trigger, in short every physical movement, must occur on the beat of a drum.
>
> (Kerr, 1980, p. 34)

The effect is devastatingly eerie; the advance is choreographed in such a way as to make the men appear as automata or the walking dead, their shuffling advance inexorable and inescapable. The result is one of the great images of dehumanization, soldiers set in motion like the

wind-up toys of Chapter 3, advancing into a blizzard of bullets in accordance with the merciless pulse of the beat, the scene's lethal tempo. It also suggests the trauma of shell-shock: involuntary movements, automatic tics, the nightmarish anxiety of not being in control of one's body. Indeed, one might go further and argue that the strangeness of the silent war film appears uncannily close to the most commonly documented symptoms of shell-shock: jerky, paralysed movements, recurrent nightmares, obsessive repetition, an inability to form words. It is as if the cinematic apparatus itself has come to exhibit the very symptoms of the trauma.

Figure 8.2 Harry Langdon and Doris Dawn in *Heart Trouble* (Harry Langdon, 1928).
Source: Harry Langdon Corporation/First National.

The doll's hospital

The first writings on war neuroses were presented at the International Congress of Psychoanalysts in Budapest in 1918, where an ambitious project to set up of a number of therapeutic centres was announced, a program later scrapped due to the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. While Freud didn't personally present a paper on the topic, he did write the introduction to a collection of pieces from the conference, *Psychoanalysis and War Neuroses*, and more importantly employed the key concept of repetition-compulsion as the driving force behind what remains his most controversial and scientifically unverifiable concept, the death drive. It is also worth pointing out at this stage that there was a good reason why Freud should be concerned with ideas of absence and presence at this time: his son, Martin, fighting at the front, had disappeared in 1918 and word that he had been taken prisoner by the Italian army only reached Freud in April 1919, some months before his release. Disappearances, gaps and absences, of limbs, people and language, are central to the body of work surrounding shell-shock, and provide a link with the cinematic representations we are concerned with here.

The chief symptom observed by doctors at the time was the compulsive need of the patient to obsessively revisit unpleasant traumatic experiences again and again, usually in the form of nightmares, anxiety attacks or some kind of symbolic representation of the terrible episode. Accompanying this was an inability to rationally articulate the event, either in terms of aphasia, the inability to call the correct words to mind, a chronic stammering and verbal dislocation, or, in the worst cases, mysterious psychosomatic paralysis. Without recourse to words, it was as if the distinction between 'there' and 'not there', absence and presence, began to break down; lost limbs still generated discomfort while perfectly healthy parts of the body, most commonly the vocal chords, refused to work at all. Papers from the conference suggest contradictory interpretations; while some doctors see the compulsive re-enactment of the trauma as an attempt to master it through symbolization, others interpret the retreat from language as a form of infantile regression, returning the subject to a pre-linguistic state. Freud himself, however, interprets these nightmares as an unconscious longing to return to an even earlier state of being, the condition of inorganic matter itself. The thing that is truly traumatic, Freud argues, isn't the actual moment of impact, but the moment just before it occurs, the terrible anticipation of the event and the psychic tension that this creates

in the patient. Rather than repeating the event over and over again in an attempt to somehow act differently and somehow get things right, the real desire is to regain a passive, unexcitable state, free of such stimuli – ultimately the state of death, non-consciousness, inert matter. Crucially, this is a state outside of any kind of signification at all.

There are two competing notions of repetition at work here. One represents a working-through of the material (as perhaps early audiences watching the Lumières' train worked through their fear of technology with each subsequent screening, adjusting and realigning their mental apparatus to the demands of the modern world); the other displays what Freud terms 'a tendency in all vital processes to return to an earlier state', the terminus of which is death (Stevens, 1983, p. 39). 'The aim of all life is death' he argues, '[because] inanimate things existed before living ones' (Stevens, 1983, p. 39). This drive, he came to believe, operates in vital opposition to the pleasure principle (the principle which is often assumed to underpin the whole notion of film). Man is a conservative creature, Freud believes, willing to forsake pleasure in order to avoid pain; hence, if stimuli bring over-excitement and traumatic upset, then surely it is better to feel nothing at all, to seek the *nirvana* of non-consciousness. This is a far more radical notion of regression than that which psychoanalysis had so far been willing to admit, a regression not so much to the infantile as to the inorganic.

Of course, as we've seen in previous chapters, ideas of infantile regression have always been central to psychoanalytic readings of slapstick comedy: the desire to escape adult responsibility, to shake off the yoke of repression and indulge in joyously antisocial behaviour, is an idea close to the uninhibited heart of physical comedy. Indeed, most silent comedians appear, whether explicitly or implicitly, as children masquerading in the baggy clothes of adults, subject to instinctual drives rather than cold, external laws. Comedy, therefore, seems to operate under the aegis of the pleasure principle: anarchic, lusty, bound to the mechanics of wish-fulfilment. How, then, does this relate to the anxious trauma of the First World War and Freud's idea of the death drive?

Chaplin's *Shoulder Arms* (1918), like much of Chaplin's *oeuvre*, derives its sense of pathos from the idea of a small, scrawny protagonist threatened by a world of bullies and blows, an implicitly child's-eye view of the world. Charlie is by far the smallest, least co-ordinated, most awkward of his battalion. His feet point stubbornly outwards rather than

in, his gun is too heavy, his uniform is ridiculous: he fails to fit in, which is perhaps one of the most basic childhood anxieties. However, at the same time the audience is very aware of the fact that we don't want him to conform; he remains vitally himself when all others have been conscripted into a grey, undifferentiated mass. Moreover, his character oscillates between childish anxiety (I am smaller, weaker, clumsier than everyone else) and childish wish-fulfilment (Charlie is inexplicably, almost magically, a crack shot, faster, smarter, stronger; when he single-handedly returns to the trench with an entire battalion of giant German prisoners in tow, he offers by way of explanation one of the most famous jokes of the war: 'I surrounded them'). This mixture of anxiety and desire is of course in accordance with the logic of dreams, and *Shoulder Arms*, like many other slapstick comedies, is retrospectively framed as an extended dream-sequence, his fantastical capture of the Kaiser at the end of the film, pure phantasy. Perhaps the most dreamlike sequence revolves around the midget German general, who commands a troop of enormous giants, a comically literal manifestation of the child's anxious awareness of size and scale. When Charlie captures him, he takes him over his knee and spanks him as an infant; now Charlie is the parent, the powerful one, able to mete out retribution. The very things that previously terrified him (scared, he steps back to allow all his fellow soldiers to go over the top of the trench first) he ultimately masters. A ruined house collapses around him (later inspiring Buster Keaton?), but he doesn't get hurt; snipers target him, but they always miss. This is a war that can be bent to his own desires, trussing up the Kaiser and winning the approval of his previously dismissive superiors by 'bringing home the bacon'.

Unsurprisingly, then, among the most appreciative audiences were those servicemen watching the film while convalescing in military hospitals and shelters across Europe; the film's release, in the last few months of the war, chimed with the general sense of wish-fulfilment which accompanied the end of hostilities. Intriguingly, one psychiatrist commended the film as highly effective in the treatment of shell-shocked soldiers, having an 'extremely positive effect upon morale and general health'; on film, shells explode but fail to deafen, bullets are fired but always miss, even the privations of trench life can be turned into comedy (Vance, 2003, p. 89). Certainly the huge popularity of the film among returning servicemen helped protect Chaplin from the claims of callous irresponsibility or bad taste, which would later dog Keaton's *The General* (1927). True, many in authority took an extremely dim view of Chaplin's jokes about lice, bad food and

flooded trenches, considering such gags to be both offensive and detrimental to the war effort. Indeed, certain quarters questioned whether a conflict that had taken so many lives should ever form the basis of puerile comedy, particularly as the routines were being filmed while men actually fought and died. Certainly there is a tension in the film, as there is in all of Chaplin's best work, between the harsh realism of the film's setting and the pantomime routines enacted there (between the pleasure and the reality principles, one might say). The film's child's-eye view of the war resolves anxiety through fantasy precisely through the idea of comic repetition. With each scene, Charlie adjusts to his surroundings, their circumstances and threat; with each repeated situation (on the training ground, in the trench, on the battlefield), the material is reworked to transform clumsiness into facility, fear into bravery, impotence into strength. This, then, is repetition as wish.

However, a very different version of infantile regression can be seen in the war films of one of the strangest of all silent film clowns, Harry Langdon. Langdon's rather eerie man-baby was, like Arbuckle, a moon-faced toddler trapped in the body of a middle-aged man, his bewildered expression that of an infant woken up in the middle of the night and desperate to get back to sleep. In a whole series of films, including the now lost *Heart Trouble* (1928), Langdon is cast as a doughboy (rather appropriately since this is what his body seems modelled from) in several of his early shorts, most importantly *All Night Long* (Harry Edwards, 1924) and *Soldier Man* (Harry Edwards, 1925), and the war is central to both his most famous feature, *The Strong Man,* directed by Frank Capra in 1926, and his last silent film, *Heart Trouble* (Harry Langdon, 1928), which opened in a single theatre in New York as half of a double-bill, playing for just one day in December 1928, before being withdrawn by First National, never to be publicly re-screened.

All Night Long begins with Harry fast asleep in a deserted movie theatre (thus setting up the oneiric context central to his *oeuvre*), disturbed by the late night break-in of a gang of thieves, one of whom is his former army sergeant. This, in turn, leads to an extended flashback sequence in which the malicious sergeant sends a wholly inadequate Harry to man the infamous 'suicide post' in no man's land, and where Harry (purely by chance) rescues a marooned general and wins his promotion, a plot (and dream) which thus has much in common with Chaplin's *Shoulder Arms*. In *Soldier Man,* Harry is taken prisoner on his first day at the front, but unwittingly escapes on Armistice Day while the German soldiers give themselves up. Unaware that the war

is over, he haunts the now deserted battlefields, eventually winding up in Bomania (presumably Bohemia, although its citizens appear to speak Russian), where he becomes embroiled in a comic take on *The Prisoner of Zenda,* when it is discovered that he is the spitting image of the permanently well-oiled king. Again, as in *Shoulder Arms,* the bulk of the film is revealed retrospectively to have been a dream; at the end of the film Harry wakes up in his own bed, no longer the king and shorn of his regal powers. It is, however, *The Strong Man* that provides the most iconic shots of Harry wandering across an eerily devastated and deserted front, his painted face, infantile waddle and child's catapult entirely at odds with the stock footage of mass combat with which Capra opens the movie. His comic duel with a German sniper (the strong-man, Zandow), which borrows the business of firing inedible military food rather than bullets from Chaplin, sits uneasily with the flattened, empty landscape it takes place in, a cosmic landscape no less empty or devastated than Death Valley in Von Stroheim's *Greed* (1923), and in which the last remaining insect-like humans continue to fight to the death (though here Zandow simply picks Harry up like a naughty child and hauls him off, a sequence which is the exact antithesis of the gag with Chaplin's midget chief). The idea of being lost (a title-card in *Soldier Man* describes him as 'the soldier who was not accounted for'), the setting of an empty landscape which is more nowhere than somewhere, turns up in each of Langdon's 'dough-boy' films, a motif which serves to stress Harry's vulnerability and which also disturbs by its sense of displacement: how on earth did Harry end up here?

The connection between Langdon and the First World War was made when Capra, searching for possible scenarios, read Hašek's caustic military satire, *The Good Soldier Švejk and His Adventures in the Great War* (1918). There are, of course, huge differences between Hašek's Czech everyman and Langdon's peculiar stub end of a man – Švejk only pretends to be an idiot in order to fool his Austrian superiors while Harry is the genuine article – but there are connections, most explicitly in the strangest and longest section of the book, Švejk's Anabasis, where the good soldier loses his regiment and wanders like a sleepwalker across an interminable no man's land, drifting in infinite circles as in an infantry man's endless anxiety dream. Langdon's incredibly vulnerable man-child is also introduced lost upon the battlefield: timorous, frail, slow moving and slow thinking, as fragile as the butterfly at the end of *All Quiet on the Western Front,* or like some kind of wind-up toy slowly running down.

Figure 8.3 Harry Langdon and Priscilla Bonner in *Long Pants* (Frank Capra, 1927).
Source: Harry Langdon, Harry Langdon Corporation/First National.

Sleepwalkers on parade

The connection between Langdon and shell-shock seems clear. Much of the strangeness of Langdon's comedy comes from its sheer slowness; it is as if Harry takes long seconds to decide to make any gesture but then at the last minute decides not to, unsure of its meaning or afraid of getting hurt. This eerie indecision, a kind of comic paralysis, creates a strange half-hearted rhythm of its own; Harry is always too late, too unsure, too weak, paralysed between inexplicable choices and confused by the world, lost in a kind of timid limbo. Rather, his gestures seem to peter out (his salute to an officer in *All Night Long* becomes the merest trace of a wave) or simply fail to happen, thwarting all laws of comic expectation. Joyce Rheuban defines his persona as 'pathologically semi-conscious', his behaviour 'that of someone who is in a catatonic state or comatose condition . . . someone who has been dazed or stunned by a powerful physical blow' (Rheuban, 1983, pp. 15, 57). His hesitation, reaching out towards the inexplicable, extravagantly fleeing from it, and yet somehow staying exactly where he is, verges

Figure 8.4 Priscilla Bonner, Harry Langdon and Alma Bennett in *Long Pants* (Frank Capra, 1927).
Source: Harry Langdon, Harry Langdon Corporation/First National.

on inertia, every laboured impulse bizarrely cancelled out by its opposite aspect. Like a clumsy tightrope walker in slap-shoes (Richard Dyer MacCann describes him as 'a lost soul from some European circus' (1997, p. 172)), Langdon waivers above an eternally unknowable void, uncertain as to which step might bring him the least pain. His character lacks initiative, ambition, motivation; in Langdon's films, as in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953), nothing happens and then nothing happens again. Harry's response is to go back to sleep, to retreat back to a kind of foetal state (Richard Leary famously describes his persona as

an embryo arrested at the larval stage (Rheuban, 1983, p. 55)), his little bud of a mouth closing up, eyes tight shut, head tucked in. No matter where he is – on the battlefield, in a woman's arms, in the middle of the road – Harry seems able to curl up in his own lap and somehow hide behind himself, like a child hiding under a bedspread who thinks that because he can't see the rest of the world, the world can't see him. 'A seraphic smile would steal over his face as sleepiness descended', claims Walter Kerr:

> He would lower himself onto the nearest object available, without bothering to see if it were there, turn up his coat collar to shield him from night winds, lock his arms together in serene contemplation, eyes closed, pasty face composed, one ear cocked slightly so as not to miss the music playing somewhere.
>
> (Kerr, 1980, p. 265)

A sleepwalker in a minefield, Harry's inward swoon, that slow blink of his eyes which washes away all traces of the waking world, is both his salvation (if I close my eyes it will all go away) and the source of his terrible, almost unbearable, weakness. Unsurprisingly, the surrealists loved him. Ado Kyrou defines him as 'the man who does not want to wake up' (Rheuban, p. 55), while Paul Gilan lionizes his art in even more poetic terms:

> I salute Langdon as a privileged victim of sleeping sickness. In spite of himself he benumbs objects, people in the neighbourhood, the street, the whole décor. Sleep grabs him by the hair, envelops him, bathes him in its fluid. Harry opens his eyes wide: he doesn't recognize his bicycle, the daisy which blossoms in its pot, the bricks that set the crease in his trousers. He falls asleep again. Will he get up? He sleeps standing up . . . He passes among the living, sleepwalking.
>
> (Rheuban, 1983, p. 55)

Despite the dreamlike, even womblike, sense of protection afforded to him (for Harry is never really hurt but afforded the immortal invulnerability of the truly innocent or guileless), Harry's mental level seems to be much lower than even that of a dreamer, closer to that of a shoe or a hat. He seems less a fey wool-gatherer than stunned or dazed – his regression is not just to the level of infantile fantasy, but a retreat to an even more immobile, almost wholly arrested state. When shot in *The Strong Man,* he pushes his finger into the hole with a strange

blank-faced lack of curiosity. If punched or in anyway hit, his immediate response is utter immobility (followed by perhaps a blink) and then a vacant search for somewhere to lie down; if no space is available then he will simply lower himself into a sitting position and remain suspended in empty space. There are no pratfalls in Langdon's work, only the slowest of slow burns: faced with danger (bullies, blows, fast women) Harry placidly grinds to a halt. When actual slow motion is used in *All Night Long* it feels bizarrely redundant: in many of Langdon's most protracted sequences, it is already difficult to know whether the image has stalled or is stuck.

The most striking example of this (though admittedly the effect is marred by an unnecessary edit and close-up) comes from perhaps Langdon's strangest feature, *The Chaser* (Harry Langdon, 1928). Planning to commit suicide, Harry gulps down a whole draught of what he believes to be poison (it is, in fact, castor oil), writes a note to his wife, covers himself with a tablecloth and carefully assumes an appropriate position on the kitchen floor. Langdon then holds the camera on his prone form for a whole painful minute (one of the longest minutes in film comedy) before the effects the liquid finally take hold and Harry rushes hot foot to the bathroom. It is impossible to imagine any other comedian of the period attempting such a static take, or, for that matter, milking the (not especially funny) material in such a provocative manner. Watching it, it is hard to imagine that Harry will ever move again.

Similarly, in *The Strong Man*, Harry, who has spent the entire movie searching for his war-time pen pal (and sweetheart) Mary Brown, finally gets to meet her in the parsonage garden of the small town he has ended up in with Zandow. As he shyly approaches, however, she tearfully confesses to him that she has hidden the fact that she is blind, and then anxiously awaits his response. Harry does not move. When Mary reaches out her arms in order to grope her way to a nearby bench, he still exhibits no response. Believing his silence to be proof of his lack of feelings, Mary seats herself on the bench and cries. From Harry there is not even the slightest gesture: not a blink, not a flicker, nothing. Capra holds the static camera for an uncomfortably long time, and then, agonizingly slowly, fades to black. Harry still hasn't moved.

This deeply unsettling scene, proof of Harry's autistic disengagement rather than either the expected romantic encounter or, for that matter, its comic subversion, in many ways acts against the idea of Harry as a sentimental waif or, indeed, any sense of obvious pathos. Rather, the scene seems to undercut the whole thrust of the narrative and,

noticeably, the next scene does not carry on from it, but jumps to a more normalized setting up of relations between the pair. At the end of the movie Harry even marries her; but how can such a soul as he ever truly be married?

His character's actual age, like his sexuality, seems impossible to determine. As Walter Kerr notes, 'his motor responses, and to some degree his cerebral responses, were approximately those of a four year old child. Call him and he didn't know whether to come or not. Children are uncertain about how to respond properly; they have difficulty in reading the social message that is being imparted' (Kerr, 1980, p. 267). In essence, Harry is 'unsure of the verbal and visual structures that the adults about him seem to use with such ease' (Kerr, 1980, p. 267). This could be why Harry never understands orders, can't follow commands and often seems bewildered by what the adults around him are doing, the complexities of communication being beyond him. He makes a separate peace on his pillow rather than winning the war. In terms of the commands of language, Langdon is a deserter; as Mark Edmundson notes, 'the infant is etymologically one who cannot speak' (Freud, 2003, p. x). Instead, Harry blindly mimics the expressions of those around him, leaning in to study facial features in the hope that they might shed some light on the mysterious utterances coming from their lips; their meanings, however, remain as inexplicable as the bearded woman he encounters in *Lost and Found* (1925): should he doff his hat, shake hands or attempt a kiss? Much as he longs to touch her curly locks, he has to content himself with rubbing his own soft, baby-like skin, her presence as a person rather than an object (and never mind the whole concept of social niceties) inescapably beyond him. Similarly, in several of his movies, Harry seems unable to differentiate between representations of a thing and the thing itself. In *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp* (1926), he confuses his girlfriend, Betty, with her picture on a billboard and, in *The Strong Man*, he searches for Mary Brown by holding her photo in one hand and racing up to every woman he sees, anxiously comparing the two (at inappropriately close quarters, of course). Ultimately, even the link between the woman and her image eludes him. When he is eventually accosted by the villainous Lily, claiming to be his true love in order to rob him, he cannot understand why she looks so little like her photograph; confused, he stares at the pair for a time, but then simply gives up. This phenomenon, like so much else for Harry, lies forever beyond his understanding.

It is little wonder, then, that his films repeatedly grind to a halt. At best, Harry is capable of undertaking only one action at a time, and

when another thought attempts to impress itself upon him, he forgets to do even that. One stubby finger goes up to his chalk mark of a mouth, his expression (sketched, according to James Agee, 'with the simplicity of a nursery school drawing' (Agee, 1999, p. 28)) glazes over, and not even a blink disturbs his puddle-like face. In Rheuban's words, 'Harry is literally paralysed by the spectacle for as long as it takes place before him, and is subject to sporadic paralytic seizures for some time after that' (Rheuban, 1893, p. 124). These seizures, almost epileptic absences, both slow down his actions and force him to attempt something again and again. One might think of Harry in *The Strong Man* attempting to down his cough medicine, torn between the impulse to drink something that will make him better and his awareness of how bad the liquid actually tastes. Unable to solve this contradiction, he simply hovers; the same thing happens when he tries to summon up the courage to punch the rude passenger in the same scene, his identical squeamish gesture aborted again and again.

As with Chaplin in *Shoulder Arms,* many of Langdon's routines are based upon a principle of repetition, here stretched out to an almost soporific degree: 'this Langdon's no cure for insomnia', grumbles Mack Sennett's cameraman, Dick Jones (Louvish, 2003, p. 216). Again and again he starts to do something, changes his mind, and then starts to do it again, 'endlessly rehearsing the act of growing up' (Kerr, 1980, p. 267). Repetition is here conflated with stasis or spasm, an eternal loop or process that cannot (in Freudian terms) be 'worked through'. The result is paralysis, a kind of perpetual cringe. Again, one might think of shell-shocked soldiers trapped in an endlessly repeated memory, continually bringing the patient back to the second before the blow (the moment when one realises that it is now far too late to react), a situation from which the patient awakens in a fright. The comic tension of Langdon's work derives from the fact that we, the audience, know that there will be terrible consequences if Harry doesn't act now, and yet at the same time we know he never will. In a sense, 'not waking up' is both cure and symptom for him; indeed, one might argue that, rather than attempting to master the traumatic situation through symbolization, Langdon pursues the inorganic state set out by Freud, and therefore represents one extreme example of the various possible responses to the war.

The missing and the lost

Representations of the First World War are full of holes and absences – craters, dug-outs, shattered, windowless buildings, lost limbs, vanished

comrades – and in silent films this absence also takes on an aural dimension, a caesura at the heart of the cinematic apparatus. Something is *missing* (the lack of colour is of secondary importance here, but also adds to the supernatural aura which attends early film), an absence which paradoxically becomes a kind of negative presence, or a kind of invisible trace element, hidden from the senses. But how is this absence felt? Christian Metz has compared cinema to traumatized patients' experience of 'phantom-limbs'; although the amputated limb is now missing, its absence continues to produce a series of sensations in the brain, an effect all the more painful as there is no longer anything for doctors to treat. Similarly, film (also not there, an illusion) is capable of eliciting enormous emotional responses even though the viewer, at some level, remains aware that he or she is only watching a film (Metz, 1982, p. 70). This 'splitting of belief', Metz argues, is central to the act of watching a film; on film, this *lack,* whether defined in terms of either a lack of reality ('This isn't realistic at all!') or a refusal to play out our own desires ('This isn't what I wanted to happen') is masked by a fetishistic concentration on film technique which both draws attention to the apparatus of illusion but also hides this unreality beneath a guise of convention and practice. This process thus works in two different directions. In fetishism, the phantom signifier is projected onto an empty space, thereby dressing or masking the feared void that is the source of our 'unpleasure' or anxiety. In the case of phantom limbs, this process is revered; it is now the absent signifier that still exerts a sense of presence, as a kind of monstrous phantasm, impervious to any kind of understanding or control. Film, therefore, plays with the idea of 'there' and 'not there', negotiating this distinction but in the process conflating the two terms. Indeed, for Lacan, the whole notion of fetishism, with its links to castration anxiety (John Gilbert's loss of a leg at the end of *The Big Parade* is explicitly linked to a loss of masculine potency), is primarily to be understood as a symbolic drama, 'a decisive metaphor for all the losses, real and imaginary, the child has suffered' (Metz, 1982, p. 69).

The 'lack' in Lacan, so to speak, is ultimately the distinction between language and reality, signs and unimaginable existence (the Lacanian Real). Laplanche, however, interprets the idea of a 'lack' or absence rather differently to either Metz or Lacan. Crucially, he takes as his starting point, Freud's insight that 'our unconscious is [...] inaccessible to the idea of our own death' (Laplanche, 1993, p. 6). In the unconscious, Freud believed, death is always the death of the *other*; we can identify with this other figure, even mourn the loss of ourselves through it,

but our own mortality is inconceivable at this most basic psychic level. One might think of soldiers who think only of how close they came to death *after* the conflict is over; this retrospective meaning is applied only through the repetitious processes of memory.

However, this refusal, indeed, the inability on the part of the unconscious, to imagine the idea of death is itself paradoxical because, on another level, it actively longs for it: at least in the sense of death as an absence of painful stimuli, the peace of non-existence. This primordial desire, what Laplanche terms 'the axiom of inertia' (1993, p. 57), is seen by Freud as built into the very idea of repetition, the tendency to repeat in order to revert to an earlier state, to turn the vital into the inanimate, the organic to the inorganic, ultimately to reduce the level of physical and psychical tension to zero. This desire, Freud argues, has nothing to do with the longings and tensions manifested by the Oedipus conflict, but is rather something even more basic, something fundamentally entropic; it is the tendency of all matter to seek reification, a passive state: in the final analysis, to stop.

We have, perhaps, become accustomed to the idea that film narrative functions in accordance to the working-out of the pleasure principle, a kind of wish-fulfilment or waking dream. But what of Thanatos, the death drive, an idea so terrible that even psychoanalysis, even Freud himself, tried to repress it for 20 years? One could argue that this is one reason why narrative cinema is so irredeemably violent, why we are drawn to images of war and horror, as an externalization of these destructive impulses: but this answer seems too banal, too simplistic, a case of over-stimulation rather than an attempt at escaping from 'unpleasure'. One might argue instead that war films allow us to admit the idea of our own death to the unconscious, a transference made possible by our intense identification with the characters on the screen. If death is always the death of the other, then war films allow us, vicariously, to become that other, and thus play out our contradictory, even masochistic impulses. However, this idea also seems too simple, little different to classical notions regarding the cathartic 'acting out' of our own death, and ultimately failing to take into account the relation between film and time, the notion of watching something again and again. Rather, I argue that the most interesting application of the theory is through the (shell-shocked) notion of repetition, a compulsion which is central to our understanding of film.

All film operates through repetition, from the minute differences (and still greater similarities) between film-cells, central to the persistence of vision, to the crucial idea that films can be replayed, events made

to happen all over again. This compulsion to document, to preserve, to save from the void of forgetting, is at the heart of our need for film – the idea that things can be lived again, time can be manipulated, images retrieved. Are there thus two very different processes at work here? One (Chaplinesque, one might say) seeking to *animate* and thereby bring something back to life, to work through a process, to repeat so as to master or at least adapt to change, to evolve; and against this, a (Langdonian) desire to arrest this motion, to freeze the image and in the process save it from change or decay, to remove it from any kind of sequence and thereby immortalize it. But how can this desire to save a slice of time be the same as the death drive? Perhaps the answer lies in Laplanche's retroactive model, whereby film saves a moment in time and also marks its disappearance, displacing the original moment and substituting a ghostly memorial. For Freud, everything seeks stasis; applied to film, it is as if film longs to return to the eternal moment of the still photograph. For other critics, including Ian Christie, film animates moments over and over again in an attempt to come to terms with them, to accommodate their meaning and thereby exorcize anxiety. What, then, is this absence, the hole that filmic representations seek to plug? For Laplanche it is death, for Christie transience, for Lacan reality. What is important is the notion that film, like a phantom limb, always signifies loss alongside its illusion of presence. In this sense, the silent war film, with its concentration on the missing and the vanished, its eerie soundlessness which hints at a deathly absence other films seem to mask, uniquely expresses something of the phantasmal nature of the cinematic apparatus itself.

Figure C.1 *The Paleface* (Buster Keaton/Edward Cline, 1922).
Source: Joseph M. Schenck; Buster Keaton Productions/Associated First National Pictures.

Conclusion

> [Film] does not aim upward, toward intention, but pushes toward the bottom, to gather and carry along even the dregs. It is interested in the refuse, in what is just there – both in and outside the human being. The face counts for nothing in film unless it includes the death's head underneath. 'Danse macabre'. To what end? That remains to be seen.
>
> (Kracauer, 1997, p. vii)

For the great film theorist Siegfried Kracauer, the central purpose of film was to record and reveal – indeed, to redeem – the material world: things, bodies, *stuff*. The more pungent or base this materiality is, the more authentic, Kracauer believes; it is little wonder, then, that he adored Chaplin, delighting in the unwashed grubbery (dirty clothes, stinking cheese, filthy ash pails) discussed in Chapter 3. For Kracauer, slapstick's stock in trade was the collision between the body and matter, 'material life at its crudest', the way in which limbs and spinal columns interact with the accidental and the catastrophic, for 'accidents are the very soul of slapstick' (Kracauer, 1997, pp. xxi, 62). Such encounters are at once childlike 'games in the material dimension' and a series of optical and kinaesthetic shocks comparable to 'the sputtering of a machine gun', he argues (Kracauer, 1997, p. xxii). Indeed, as Miriam Hansen has brilliantly argued, Kracauer's aesthetic was itself a historical response to the two world wars, his stress on junk, ruins and fallen bodies, linked to a sense of loss, fragmentation and absence, the *weltzerfall* (world falling to pieces), discussed in the previous chapter (Kracauer, 1997, p. ix). Slapstick comedy can thus be interpreted as a cultural response to the idea of the body being placed under unbearable

stress, whether this is read as the battlefield or the factory floor, its leitmotif 'the play with danger and catastrophe' (Kracauer, 1997, p. xxii). Hence, in a wonderfully evocative phrase, Kracauer argues that the gambolling of the silent clowns takes place 'on the edge of an abyss', the humour in perfect balance with the 'omnipresent threat of annihilation' (Kracauer, 1997, p. xxii). The idea that the world is in some way unstable, or prone to fall apart at any moment (think of Sennett's disintegrating hotel rooms and exploding cars) is linked to an awareness of the ephemerality of material things, organic matter warping, rotting, melting, eroding, dissolving. The shadows on screen capture the ghost of life, as if the absence of the world were somehow inscribed in the very act of recording it. For Kracauer, photographs of the past appear as 'spectres in outmoded costumes', their evocation serving only to make us shudder: 'images do not banish the idea of death but rather succumb to it all the more' (Kracauer, 1997, p. xxxvi). Thus, the animated vitality of slapstick simultaneously banishes the idea of death (look how alive its clowns and pretty women are!) and yet, almost against its will, inscribes mortality within the very mechanisms of film, the white clown faces of the comedians also death masks. Film deals with both the overwhelming presence and absence of the material, a strange kind of mechanical séance, or in Kevin Brownlow's phrase, the parade gone by.[1]

For another German intellectual, Walter Benjamin, writing some 30 years earlier in the 1930s, the 'fleeting expressions' of early photography provide the last emanations of aesthetic 'aura' (the aura of the unique and irreplaceable – that which will not come again), and it is this which 'constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty' (Benjamin, 1992, p. 219). In terms of early film, only shadows of cult value (or magic) remain: 'the cult of remembrance of loved ones, portraits of those absent or now dead' (Benjamin, 1992, p. 221). And yet we should not mourn this, Benjamin argues. The categories of dream, poetry, the supernatural, ritual, the marvellous: all are 'ultra-reactionary', the opposite of the new ideal of mechanical reproduction that film represents. Indeed, as Peter Wollen writes, Benjamin, that paradoxical Jewish mystic, longs to expel 'enchantment' from the cinema, 'resolute in his insistence that art must be industrialized if it is to be truly modern' (Wollen, 1993, p. 48). The decay of this 'aura' is thus part of a more general falling away of magic, theology and metaphysics, 'cult value' replaced by 'exhibition value', infinitely reproducible images transformed into the property of the masses. Film belongs to science, Benjamin believes, the film-maker a surgeon laying bare the tissues

of the world; 'paradoxically', notes Wollen, 'the artificial means of film production would bring the masses closer to reality' (Wollen, 1993, p. 48).

Of course, such utopian notions appear very distant from most writings on mass culture that follow. While, like Benjamin and Kracauer, a fan of Chaplin, T.W. Adorno generally abhorred screen comedy. 'A laughing audience is a parody of humanity', he declares. 'Its members are monads' because 'mirth produces a false sense of liberation, masking blind conformity to the social order' (Bean, 2010, p. 254). Rather than liberation from conscription, infantilization binds the masses more tightly as a form of social control, proffering fantasies of wish fulfilment that ultimately displace the need for social change. A fear of technology (or rather, a fear of what technology can do to the human body) is thus transformed into a phantasy of impossible invulnerability. As Tom Gunning puts it, 'silent film comedy takes the technology of modern industrialization and converts them [*sic*] into toys, forms of amusement, even spectacles of harmless destruction, rather than instrumental production' (Gunning, 2010, p. 142). The shadows flickering in the darkness act like bedtime stories intended to salve our (entirely justified) fears and frustrations, proffering the consolation of dreams; film is a medium necessitated by the traumas of the twentieth century. This notion of control, Bernays's 'engineering of consent', brings us back to the notion of a union of consumerism, phantasy and escapism, both a one-size-fits-all balm for modern anxieties, and a way of managing desire, redirecting its energies towards the marketplace. And yet, as Freud would argue, the unruly energies of the unconscious – all those disparate longings and fears and desires – are not so easily channelled by civilization as its technocrats might hope.

Almost a century on, what are we to make of Bernays's belief in the mass media as a form of invisible social control? Although Bernays's idea of tranquilizing the masses and defusing dissent via an addiction to consumer goods might be seen as even more relevant in the twenty-first century, it does seem doubtful that any social engineers would now couch this in psychoanalytic, rather than nakedly economic, terms. Freud's import is now seen as philosophical rather than scientific or sociological; neo-liberalism may in effect still be speaking of sublimation and regression, but Freud himself has been firmly expelled from the boardroom (which doesn't necessarily make him wrong, of course). The Freudian unconscious, so central to modernism, now seems thoroughly colonized and franchised in our late

capitalist world, Facebook a more expressive manifestation of our inner worlds than our dreams. And yet I don't think that one can overestimate Freud's importance to the early twentieth century, at least in terms of popular intellectuals' determinist reworking of his mysteries and ambiguities. In this sense, Bernays's attempt to import Freudian concepts into the capitalist model unquestionably paved the way for the commodified, celebrity-obsessed, consumerist paradise we now occupy, and, although the Freudian language has since fallen out of fashion, we can still recognise Uncle Siggy as the ghost in the machine, the great head-doctor of our aching world of longing and desire.

As a system of infallible social order and control, consumer culture appears deeply flawed, feeding an appetite for ceaseless phantasy, which mass-produced objects (or rather, the signifiers of mass-produced lifestyles) will never be able to satisfy. As suggested in Chapter 2, a system built around irrational desire runs the risk of becoming irrational itself, an instability and illogic borne out by both the Wall Street crash and the financial chaos of our own present day ills. Spiralling debt, the pursuit of destabilizing short-term profit, a profound imbalance between those who produce and those who consume: both economically and socially, Bernays's model appears more in question than at any time since the Great Depression, and yet at the same time it seems clearer than ever that he can be seen as one of the great architects of our age – indeed one of the reasons why we're in this mess in the first place.

Bernays's marriage of consumerism and escapism, his merger of commodified goods and spectral images, thus appears both more and less relevant than the father of public relations could ever have guessed. While the idea of cinema as the great medium of the masses has faded in our own times, the viral image-feed of idealized, emotionally-charged images has succeeded in creating a world more saturated and sated with visions of wish fulfilment than anything dreamed of by the modernist *avant-garde*. Postmodernism appears as the late-capitalist working out of the modernist paradigm so central to this study, but one purged of any kind of adversarial aesthetic or an authoritarian belief in social conscription. For better or worse, utopian ideologies (fantasies of absolute liberation or conversely absolute control) have now disappeared from the intellectual agenda. In our atomized, individualistic, virtual world, we're all on our own; the masses (at least in the West) are consumers connected by the marketplace alone.

As a genre, slapstick comedy's importance has less to do with consumerism than with the idea of regression, with cinema's ability to roll back the years and make irrational children of us all. Such regression inevitably attracts negative connotations (as T.W. Adorno would most certainly concur). At the same time, one should stress how often children's dreams are uncertain, anxious ones, denoting less the fantasies of the ego-ideal than an inability to fit into, or even comprehend, the adult world. Slapstick comedy dramatises this struggle in a particularly striking way, its visual absurdities ultimately a symptom of (and way of thinking about) the wider absurdities of the modern world. Indeed, I would argue that ultimately it is this sense of imaginative engagement, rather than its anarchist or non-conformist appeal, which constitutes the genre's importance in the early twentieth century and beyond.

But what form does this imaginative engagement take? As seen in Chapter 3, the Freudian dream-work can be seen simultaneously to express and repress an initial wish (or fear), and one can equally apply this formulation to slapstick comedy's engagement with modernity. Comedy's fantastical harmlessness, its tendency to code phenomena as nonsense, its relief of anxiety via the explosive but innocuous release of laughter – all these suggest the comforting panacea of entertainment. And yet, at the same time, the aggressive irrationality, technological excess and relentless drive to destruction of silent slapstick simultaneously suggest a more problematic grappling with the raw material of the twentieth century, the destiny of bodies subject to tremendous force.

In short, comedy can be said to less disguise or hide the social real than to express it in a comically grotesque and fantastical manner. Thus, in many ways, the question of whether slapstick comedy ameliorates or exacerbates class tensions seems to side-step the most interesting issues involved. What emerges from any study of American silent film comedy is a sense of enormously conflicting powers at work, disparate elements (particularly in relation to work and leisure, the role of women, the perils and possibilities of technology) which stubbornly resist Bernays's attempt to synthesize them within a single rubric. Although, one might argue that the trauma of the First World War and subsequent social and economic changes necessitated the creation of a form of mass entertainment capable of dealing with such fears and uncertainties, slapstick's undermining of sense, logic and order, and its fascination with spectacles of disorder and destruction, all hint at Kracauer's edge

of the abyss, the void above which the slap-shoes teeter. Far from acting as agents of comfort and consolation, slapstick comedies naively and guilelessly portray a world of shock and catastrophe implicitly linked to the mechanisms of modern life. As such – at least when viewed from slapstick's calamitous perspective – capitalism appears less as a perpetual motion device than a vast machine of perpetual self-destruction: laughter in the dark, indeed.

Notes

1 Introducing American Silent Film Comedy: Clowns, Conformity, Consumerism

1. This speech has often been erroneously quoted (not least by Adam Curtis in his 2002 documentary *The Century of the Self*) as 'You have taken over the job of creating desire and transformed people into constantly moving happiness machines' – a tremendously resonant phrase, but not one which actually appears in the text of Hoover's speech. Spencer Howard of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library attributes the corrupted version to a mis-transcription several decades later.
2. The title of his 1947 essay. His key writings in the 1920s were *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923) and *Propaganda* (1928).
3. Of course, not all responded sympathetically to the film's vicious racist message. The NAACP mounted a particularly effective campaign against the film, which was banned in several states and sparked mass protests in others. For the full story see Melvyn Stoke, *D.W. Griffith's 'The Birth a Nation',* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
4. CPI titles made in 1917/18 include *America's Answer*, *Under Four Flags* and *Pershing's Crusaders* – distributors who wanted the new Fairbanks or Pickford picture would be forced to take a CPI release as well.

2 A Convention of Crazy Bugs: Mack Sennett and the US's Immigrant Unconscious

1. The temptation, here, is to regard Sennett's name and the Keystone brand as being broadly synonymous, but one should remember that Sennett started off, first, as an actor and then, as a director at Biograph in 1909; the Keystone Company was set up by Adam Kessel and Charles Baumann in 1912 (Sennett was never the owner). Keystone then became part of the short-lived Triangle group in 1917, before Sennett jumped ship, just six months later, to Paramount. From this point on, productions were distributed under the title of 'Mack Sennett Comedies' rather than the Keystone imprint, which remained with Triangle until its collapse in 1919. Hence, the terms Keystone and Sennett aren't simply interchangeable: there are Keystones without Sennett, and plenty of Sennett films without Keystone, even though the terms are frequently conflated. Pathé distributed Sennett's later shorts from 1923.
2. When talking about Sennett as a director, it is important to note that, while Sennett directed virtually all the Keystone shorts made between 1912 and 1913, after 1914 his role was mostly that of supervisor (planning pictures, assembling the cast, conducting rehearsals) and by the time

of the Triangle deal in 1917, his essential function was that of executive producer.

3. Louvish regards the experience as 'much like been clapped over the head with a monkey wrench for hours at a time': see Simon Louvish, *Keystone: The Life and Clowns of Mack Sennett,* London: Faber, 2003, p. xv.
4. See Walter Kerr, *The Silent Clowns,* New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1980, pp. 64–8, and Rae Beth Gordon, *Why the French Love Jerry Lewis,* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, esp. pp. 14–8.
5. Most of the stories about Kops getting crushed by speeding autos in reality are merely Hollywood fables, although it's true that vaudeville stars Joe Weber and Lew Fields quit after their taxi was hit by another car in one infamous shoot in 1915, and that during the making of *Skidding Hearts* (1917), ace driver Lewis Jackson as well as cameraman L.B. Jenkins and two spectators were killed in a crash; astonishingly, part of the footage made its way into the finished film.
6. One might also link Slapstick to Bakhtin's theory of the bodily grotesque, a concern with 'that which protrudes, bulges, sprouts or branches off [...] when a body transgresses its limits and a new one begins'. See Clayton, 2007, p. 19.
7. See Anne Marie Bean (ed.), *Inside the Minstrel Mind: Readings in Nineteenth Century Blackface Minstrelry,* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996.
8. Chaplin, however, adored Buñuel's work; indeed he used *Un Chien Andalou* as a way of punishing his daughter Geraldine as a child (Louvish, 2003, p. 235).
9. A sly reference to the tea-pot dome scandal which rocked President Harding's administration in 1921.
10. Although one might note that not even Sennett's work was free of product placement. An ad for *The Great Pearl Tangle* (1916) stresses the display of 'gowns of real sartorial importance' (King, 2009, p. 162).

3 Accelerated Bodies and Jumping Jacks: Automata, Mannequins and Toys in the Films of Charlie Chaplin

1. Charles Musser slyly notes that a title-card identifies the respectable family as the Fords – presumably Henry and his wife? After all, the husband's very first line is 'Hurry my breakfast!' See Musser, 'Work, Ideology and Chaplin's Tramp', *Radical History Review*, 1988 (41), p. 51.
2. Musser draws attention to the fact that the object Charlie is engaged in disassembling is the very instrument that regulates the workplace of modern capitalism. See Musser (1988, p. 50).
3. Chaplin actually stole the sequence from Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle's *The Rough House* (1918), although, more charitably, this 'quotation' could be seen as a tribute to his friend, who at this stage could not appear on screen.
4. It is worth noting here that Mark Winokur considers Bergson's definition to be culturally conservative in nature: eccentric movement or behaviour *deserving* of ridicule and punishment leading to correction. See Winokur (1995, p. 100). Jennifer Bean, in her essay on Chaplin, agrees. Bergson's

theory, she writes, 'identifies the fool, rebukes the automaton, and purges the non person, the thing, from proper society' (Paulus, 2010, p. 254).

5. For Rob King, this mass cultural appropriation of Chaplin's duds reflects (and reinforces) the effacement of any immigrant signifiers: the shabby derby of the stage Jew, the eccentric moustache of 'Dutch' (i.e. Germanic) comedians, the slap-shoes of Irish vaudeville routines – all these are replaced by a hybridized, *Americanized*, mass cultural persona. See King (2009, p. 85).
6. Compare Chaplin's *Work* with Ritchie's *The Curse of Work* (1915), released, a month after Chaplin's comedy and featuring suspiciously identical routines.
7. In fact, several of Edison's early Kinetoscope films were taken straight from mechanized waxwork tableaux – the only one to survive is the gruesome *The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots* (1895).
8. In Buster Keaton's 1921 *The Goat*, Buster joins a queue outside a shabby hardware store, unaware that the figures are dummies; later he strikes his match on a cigar-store Indian, only for the Indian to inexplicably grimace and come to life. Similarly, in *Safety Last* (1923), discussed in Chapter 6, a drunk mistakes a fashion dummy as a lady from 'The Follies', while Harold disguises himself as a mannequin in order to arrive at work late, unseen by the disapproving gaze of his supervisor.
9. Here one might think of the Austrian artist Oskar Kokoschka, who commissioned a dressmaker to make a life-sized model of Gustav Mahler's widow, Alma, accompanying his wooden belle to the theatre, restaurants and for private carriage rides.
10. The term 'robot' was actually coined by Czech writer Karel Čapek in his play *R.U.R*, (1920), the term deriving from the Czech word for drudgery. Even Capek's drones suffer from repetitive strain injury, however. As one scientist notes: 'they come down with something like epilepsy [...] we call it robot's cramp. They'll suddenly sling down everything they're holding, stand still, gnash their teeth – and then they'll have to go to the stamping mill'. Quoted in Peter Wollen, *Raiding the Ice Box* (1993, p. 42). See also Canty (1997).
11. Perhaps the most disturbing looking dummy in all of silent film is to be found lurking in the obscure Harry Watson vehicle, *Keep Moving* (1915), it's hairy square head all too obviously sitting on a real body. In sound films, the most terrifying of all movie mannequins is unquestionably the faceless model of a serial killer which is slowly assembled and then comes to haunt the police station in Richard Fleischer's utterly bizarre film noir, *Follow Me Quietly* (1949).
12. In this, Picabia's art is very different from Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelor's Even*, whose central themes are frustration, impotency and a cold, lonely onanism.
13. See Michael Chion, *Les Lumieres de la Ville*, Paris: Nathan, 1989.
14. Likewise, see the 1917 Ben Turpin comedy, *A Clever Dummy*, in which Turpin's janitor is forced to impersonate his robot double. See King (2009, p. 201).
15. Winokur argues that Chaplin *aestheticizes* poverty and thereby redeems it, making the immigrant experience acceptable for a working-class audience; whether this is an inescapable by-product of film is open to debate, though I would agree with Rob King that different classes tend to interpret the Tramp in different ways. A stress on his clumsiness, laziness and general fecklessness

would seem to suggest very different connotations to workers or managers, for example. See Winokur (1995, p. 83); King (2009, p. 101).

16. As Charles Musser points out, the second hand of the factory clock is actually a sword – cf. the sword that the statue of liberty wields (in lieu of a torch) in Franz Kafka's *Amerika* (1927).
17. In a throwaway line in his own autobiography (*My Life and Work*), Ford recalls one worker assigned a particularly monotonous task, a single motion of his hand, who cried and broke down when, after a few months, the foreman attempted to move him to another post: Ford graciously condescended to allow him to remain where he was. See Giedion (1948, p. 124).
18. Chaplin's political speeches often appear confused and contradictory. In his 1921 essay, 'My Trip Abroad', for example, he calls for both a reduction in 'big' government and for the setting up of a 'Bureau of Economics' to control and regulate the marketplace.
19. It should also be noted that in early Chaplin movies, including *Dough and Dynamite* (1914) and *Behind the Screen* (1916), strikers or union representatives appear as either bomb-throwing anarchists or recalcitrant layabouts. 'How dare you wake us up? We strike!' reads one title-card from the latter.
20. As Musser notes in regard to *The Pawnshop*, Charlie, who hitherto occupied his time fighting with his co-workers, destroying the objects in the shop or sleeping in a corner, only knuckles down to actual work when he meets the shop-owner's daughter: to the extent of helping to foil a robbery, anyway. See Musser (1988, p. 50).
21. See his essay 'Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thoughts' (1913) from *Totem and Taboo* (1915).
22. Perhaps as a consequence of what was going on in his personal life, or perhaps in response to various logistical problems encountered while shooting the film – not the least of which being the burning down of the set – Chaplin himself never cared for the film, not even deigning to mention it in his autobiography.
23. The Lacanian film theorist Slavoj Žižek links the coming of sound to the learning of language in the mirror phase, when the self becomes fixed in terms set by others. See Žižek (2001, p. 1).

4 Nobody Loves a Fat Man: Roscoe Fatty Arbuckle and Conspicuous Consumption in the US of the 1920s

1. See Maurizan Buscagli, *Eye on the Flesh: Fashions of Masculinity in the Early Twentieth Century,* Oxford: Westview Press, 1996.
2. Suffering from depression following the birth of her first child, Perkins Gilman sought help from Weir Mitchell in April 1887. He proscribed the rest cure (including over-eating to increase fat value) and after several week's treatment sent her home with the infamous advice to lie down for an hour after every meal, to limit intellectual activities to no more than two hours and 'never to touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live'.
3. Arbuckle's biographer, Stuart Oderman, relates how Arbuckle was regularly bullied by his father – a wheat farmer from Kansas – beaten for his laziness, weight and general lack of manliness throughout his formative years.

4. Likewise, an article by Randolph Bartlett in *Photoplay* in 1916 states that 'A, in addition to standing for Arbuckle, stands for acrobatic, agile, able-bodied, alert, active, animated, alive, astir': the antithesis of flaccid flesh.
5. In *Violence and American Cinema,* Peter Krämer points out that *The Butcher Boy* (1917) was advertised in terms of Arbuckle's rough handling of Keaton, a puff piece in *The New York Morning Telegraph* stressing his 'ability to slam him [Keaton] about harder'. See Slocum (2001, p. 107).
6. It is perhaps telling that their most tender screen kiss – indeed their only embrace that doesn't end with embarrassed eye-rolling or childish finger-licking – is seen only in silhouette form in *Fatty and Mabel Adrift* (1916), Roscoe and Mabel's shadows shyly touching.
7. Ironically, William Hearst later employed Arbuckle as director (albeit under the pseudonym William Goodman) on a number of features (including the Mildred Davies vehicle, *The Red Mill* (1927) and Arbuckle and his second wife were frequent visitors to Hearst's famous citadel, San Simeon, from 1926 onwards.
8. For Stoloff, the 'coke bottle' rumour suggests the degree to which the fat body is ambiguously sexualized – simultaneously insatiable and yet incapable of the act (Bachman, 2002, p. 162).
9. In fact, the ban on Arbuckle's films, inaugurated in April 1922, was dropped by December. Despite this, however, Arbuckle was by now almost wholly ostracized by the film-making community – with the exception of Keaton who worked with him (behind the scenes) on *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) among others.

5 Dizzy Doras and Big-Eyed Beauties: Mabel Normand and the Notion of the Female Clown

1. Sam Peeples has argued that Chaplin actually stole various routines, gestures and expressions direct form Normand: See Acker (1991, p. 56).
2. Off screen, by the early 1920s, female pilots were surprisingly commonplace. One regional airline even advertised being flown by a female pilot as 'being as safe in the air as at home with mother' (Riley, 1986, p. 85). By the 1930s, however, women were once again relegated to the role of stewardesses, then called 'hostesses' and required to possess a nursing qualification – 'at home with mother' indeed.
3. Kellerman later made several 'diving' films during the silent period. All of them are believed to be lost, although publicity for *The Daughter of the Gods* reports that 'Kellerman Performs Almost Superhuman Feats, Braves Alligators, Fire and Water to Make Picture Realistic' – she was also artistically photographed in the nude (Bean, 2002, p. 414).
4. As Rob King notes, scantily clad 'diving nymphs' were the staple of 'sex and sports' rags such as the *National Police Gazette,* where athletic achievement provides the barest pretext for the large amount of flesh on display (King, 2009, p. 216).
5. These problems also beset the most successful slapstick comediennes of the later 1920s: Louise Fazenda and Polly Moran. Fazenda's elfin slightness may have suggested impishness, but was always coded as 'ethnic' and

'working-class' in the Italian or Irish waitresses, fortune tellers and maids she played, social disadvantages that permitted her exaggerated movements and pratfalls. The rubber-faced Polly Moran's roles were also working women, whose proletarian lack of gentility was the source of both comedy and some degree of critical disdain: one (male) critic found her 'distinctly sleazy', and in many of her films (such as *Her Painted Hero* (1915)) she appears mentally deranged.

6. As Radha Vastal notes in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema,* it is extremely difficult to confidently credit Normand with directing her own films, despite Keystone's announcement that 'she is to direct every picture she acts in' in 1913 (qtd in Bean, 2002, p. 123). Vastal concludes that the term director 'has to be understood as a fluid term as it pertains to the unstandardised product and film making practices of the period'.
7. Her biographer, Betty Harper Fussell, places her in a tradition of 'sexy clowns' leading to Jean Harlow, Carole Lombard, Mae West, Jean Arthur, Ginger Rogers and Katherine Hepburn. Fussell (1982, p. 6).

6 Consumerism and Its Discontents: Harold Lloyd and the Anxieties of Capitalism

1. Rob King identifies 'Silk Hat' Harry Gribbon, as the first 'non-grotesque' comedian in the Sennett stable, performing in a series of aristocratic, light farces from 1915. See King (2009, p. 169).
2. 'Harold Lloyd is a man of no tenderness, no philosophy, the embodiment of American cheek and indefatigable energy. His movements are all direct, straight; the shortest distance between two points he will traduce impudently and persistently, even if he is knocked down at the end of each trip; there is no poetry in him, his whole utterance being epigrammatic, without overtone or image'. Gilbert Seldes, quoted by Vance (1999, p. 82).
3. Jane M. Gaines argues that 'The historical similarities between the movie palace and the department store can never be stressed enough [...] [both] exquisite containers for opulence and excess, the fruits of mass production displayed in their magnitude and multiplicity'. She goes on to relate the multiple images on the film strip to the rows of shelved goods in a store, linked to notions of consumption, seriality and instant availability (Gledhill and Williams, 2000, p. 101).
4. In fact, although the stunt work in *Safety Last* was dangerous, a certain amount of camera trickery was involved. A two-story set was actually mounted upon the building from which Lloyd appeared to be hanging, the skillful use of camera angles creating an illusion of perspective. Moreover, as close ups of the climber's hands reveal, at least some of the stunt work was carried out by the 'real' human fly in the film, Bill Strother.
5. In *The Body in American Slapstick,* Alex Clayton stresses the ways in which 'the tuxedo confers physical form to Harold's dream of being accepted and popular [...] The very over-eagerness of Harold's gesticulations, designed to ingratiate himself with the group he aspires towards, in fact accelerates the demise of the suit and hence his chances of becoming one of their number' (Clayton, 2007, p. 79).

7 Buster Keaton and the American South: The First Things and the Last

1. Given the number of lost and damaged films, it is, of course, hard to come up with hard statistics regarding this, but for a discussion of the topic see Roy Kinnard (1996), *The Blue and the Grey on the Silver Screen,* p. xii.
2. See Maxim Gorky's famous essay, 'The Kingdom of Shadows', first published in 1896, reprinted in *Kino* (Leda, 1960). See also Christie (1994, pp. 31–3).
3. See Sigmund Freud (1915/1916), 'On Transience' in *The Pelican Freud Library Vol XIV: Art and Literature,* 1988, pp. 287–90.

8 The Shell-Shocked Silents: Langdon, Repetition-Compulsion and the First World War

1. For an excellent application of Laplanche to film, see Downing (2004, pp. 90–1). For Laplanche's own writings on the topic, see Laplanche (1993, pp. 39–48).
2. Quoted by Kevin Brownlow and David Gill, *D.W. Griffith: The Father of Film,* 1993.

Conclusion

1. See Kevin Brownlow, *The Parades' Gone By,* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968.

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